

The snake who lived

Book 1: The philosopher's stone

"Better Hufflepuff than Slyth'rin. All of 'em Dark wizards came from Slyth'rin. Like Yeh-know-who."

Rubeus Hagrid, Harry Potter à l'école des sorciers, page 84

Author's note: Keep in mind that I'm using the French version of Harry Potter, as I don't have the American or British version. Wish I did though! The quote above is translated from the French version of philosopher's stone, a version which I hate the title (That literally means "Harry Potter at the wizards' school".)

Author's introduction:

Harry Potter. A name known everywhere, in your world, dear reader, or in Harry's wizarding world. A name that rhymes, by the year 1997 of Harry's world, with the bravery, greatness and power... of Gryffindor.

But one day can change it all. One small, insignificant event in an entire life of adventures can completely change its course. One tiny second late and a meeting, either positive or negative, is avoided. A second of hesitation and one life is lost, a second of lateness and a death is avoided. A single step close to a column can pass an inch from hitting it and bringing down the building; what humans call destiny or luck is merely a lot of coincidences, or events that happened because others did. This is why it is enjoyable to look at all of those alternate universes, to see how things *might* have been if something had been avoided; what if Lily and James Potter hadn't died? Would the world be a better place, or covered in Voldemort's

darkness? What if Tom Riddle hadn't abandoned his pregnant wife, would Lord Voldemort have arisen? What if Mrs Riddle never met Tom Riddle? Would the Slytherin line have extinguished?

All of these are interesting ideas to play with. But personally, I am more interested into what would have happened if, on a nice summer day of 1991, a couple of days before the arrival of his letters, Harry James Potter had met someone; a young witch of his age, a half-blood witch who's mother was in Slytherin... Blaise Zabini.

It may sound like nothing, but keep in mind that Harry didn't know he was a wizard; heck, he didn't know such a thing existed until Hagrid arrived. And Hagrid gave him his impression on the Hogwarts houses, as the quote above tells. Already, before even being at Hogwarts, Draco and Hagrid gave him a sour view of the Slytherin house, making him plead with the hat to be in Gryffindor. However... all of this will change, because of a single meeting....

~~ Super saya-jin Gotan

Prologue: *The universe changes...*

Harry Potter sighed heavily, looking out the window of the kitchens. How he longed to be outside, to play with his friends, to have fun... yet he didn't have any friends, he was locked indoors and he certainly wouldn't have fun, considering Dudley's friends were here. A new family was once again moving in the neighboring house; they never stayed more than a month. Aunt Petunia was too nosy, Uncle Vernon was too noisy and Dudley was too spoiled and insufferable. Then, there was him, whom the Dursleys told everyone was 'Mentally ill'.

He scowled and looked around no one. Might as well make some friends before Aunt Petunia did her usual damaging greeting. There was no chance he would be able to sneak past the living room to get to the front door; his aunt and uncle were both there. Quickly and silently, he unlocked the window and lifted it open. With slight difficulty, he managed to squeeze through and land safely on the other side, where he closed the window and walked away from the house, making sure to duck when passing by the living room windows.

He made it to the other side of the white picket fence and found himself in a messy yard, which Dudley's gang had trashed a while ago for no other reason than their own amusement.. Before him, bulky men carried various objects: a blue sofa, a large TV, an empty aquarium, a bag of small, flashy fishes, a wooden bookcase, two oddly well taken-care of brooms... 'Everyone has their oddities, I guess.'

He spotted a girl, who was sitting on a yet to be placed stool. She was small, a bit like him, with almost black dark red hair that reached down her mid-back. She was wearing a pair of blue jeans and a sleeveless green shirt. She was looking bored out of her wits and stared longingly at the TV as it passed by her. Harry decided it was as good a place to start as any.

"Hi there!" He said, walking up to her. "You're our new neighbor?"

The girl looked up and nodded, smiling.

“Yup! My name’s Blaise Zabini. What’s yours?”

“I’m Harry Potter.” He said. “Where are you from?”

The girl didn’t answer. She just stared at him, at his scar and back at him. “You really are... oops, sorry. You were saying?”

“What do you mean, ‘I really am’? I’m what?” For a moment, he was afraid she would say ‘boring’, ‘Stupid’ or any other insult.

She shook her head and smiled at him. “It doesn’t really matter, does it?”

“BOY! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!” came a shrill yell from number four, Privet drive.

Harry sighed. “Busted. I’m in trouble now...”

As Harry walked back to his house, a tall woman with almost identical hair and brown eyes walked up to the girl, just in time to see a large, burly man grab the boy by the shoulders and pull him inside. A tall and skinny woman walked up to them.

“Hello, neighbor... excuse my nephew, he’s a bit disturbed...” she began.

Harry was roughly shoved inside his cupboard, which was locked as soon as the door was closed. He sighed. By now, his aunt had told them the lies she had invented for the sole purpose of making his life miserable.

Evening came and, in number five Privet Drive, the family was in an deep discussion, the blinds down, the fireplace lit with a... blue fire? Out of which a head was talking? That’s it... this is too weird, I’m gettin’ out of here... What? ... Oh yeah... my contract. Sorry peeps.

“Professor Dumbledore, with all the respect I have for you, I can’t honestly believe you let Harry Potter live with muggles like those!” Mrs Zabini said, a look of anger evident on her face.

“That uncle of his looks like he’s got blood pressure problems... he turned purple when I spoke to him about Harry.” Mr Zabini added.

“Elmira, Mr Zabini, I see what you mean. However, it is imperative that he stays in the house. Powerful enchantments have been placed all over it, protecting him as long as he lives close to the Dursleys. They’re his last living relatives. If there was any other way, I wouldn’t have done that, but...”

“Those spells might be protecting him against the world outside, but those Dursleys are mistreating him, as far as I could tell. His aunt kept mumbling about ‘ungrateful brat’ and ‘mental ward’ every time I spoke to her about him. No child should be THAT thin, either.”

“And what do you propose?”

“That we tell him what he is. It could only help, after all, if he knows he’s got magic in him, he can work to control his accidental magic, so he gets punished less. Plus, I think he could use a friend.”

“I agree. That Dudley Dursley and his gang look like bullies and as I know them, Harry is a walking target. All he wants is friends.” Mr Zabini said.

Albus Dumbledore sighed and nodded. “All right. You may befriend mister Potter and tell him of his heritage. However, do not go any further. Do not tell him he’s famous, or anything that could go to his head. The last thing we need is for him to become arrogant. And do try to keep it hidden from the Dursleys, please.”

And the fire turned back to yellow, the head vanished and everything became normal in the magical family’s home.

July 23 was going quite rotten for Harry Potter. Dudley’s gang had invaded the house and inundated his cupboard. Petunia had thrown a fit, only because some of the water had sprayed in her horrible mustard-colored carpet. He was tired of hearing her yell at Dudley and knew that somehow, she would manage to put the blame on him.

Not leaving her the chance, he quickly slipped out of the front door and away from number four Privet drive.

"Fancy seeing you outside, Harry." Blaise said, smiling slightly. "Never thought those relatives of yours would let you out."

Harry smiled a bit. "Well, actually, they didn't let me..."

"Then you better come in before they spot you outside." She replied, grabbing his hand and pulling him inside number five Privet drive.

The house was nice and cozy, well lit by naked bulbs. Closed boxes littered the free area, leaving enough room for one to walk and to open doors, but barely. Two floors, seven rooms and two bathrooms, it was quite a spacious house.

Not letting go of his hand, she pulled him toward the living room, where the TV was on and two adults, most likely her mother and father, were sitting on the same blue sofa he had seen being carried yesterday. As they entered, they both looked at him and smiled.

"Harry Potter, a pleasure to meet you." Mrs Zabini said, getting up. "Blaise told me about you."

"Oh... Is it ok if I stay here for a while? The Dursleys are gonna want my head soon."

"It's very ok, Harry." Mr Zabini assured, smiling warmly. Harry couldn't help but feel calmer around them. "In fact, we wanted to speak with you. Here, sit down and have some tea."

"About what?" He asked, sitting down on the comfortable couch on which a small cup of steamy tea was laying, installed just beside an open box filled with odd bottles of various unknown substances. He was starting to get a bit nervous.

"Was there ever any odd things going on around you, Harry? I dunno... floating objects, disappearing things, things that shouldn't happen normally... anything unusual, preferably when you're stressed or angry?"

Harry immediately thought just a few weeks ago, when the Dursleys had brought him to the zoo just a month ago. The glass between

Dudley and a giant boa mysteriously vanished. Then, there was his hair; no matter how much Aunt Petunia cut it, it always came back the same length, the exact same way. And the time when he found himself on top of the school's roof when trying to run away from Dudley. However, he wondered how did they know. Aunt Petunia probably wouldn't tell about that, nor would Dudley or uncle Vernon...

"Uh... yeah, sometimes..." he said, looking around nervously.

Only now did he notice the few odd objects in the house. The Dursleys would throw a fit. The brooms were displayed like some kind of prize, a large pewter cauldron out of which purple smoke was coming out was on a fire burning on the wooden table and, just beside it, an oddly done, well tempered-with stick was laying.

"That's normal for our kind." Mrs Zabini continued. "You have a secret that the Dursleys know, that I know, that everyone in our world knows, but that was hidden from you for eleven years. Harry, you're a wizard."

Harry promptly spit his tea out, eyes wide open in shock. Him? A wizard? As in the mages like Merlin in Dudley's children story books?

For a moment, he tried to imagine himself with a long, white beard, wielding a staff. However, for some reason, his mental image's beard covered his entire face, hiding it completely and the staff was broken in half, the top part finding the quickest path to his head; gravity. "You're joking, right?" He exclaimed.

"Nope, deadly serious." She replied. "You've been gifted with magic."

"Magic... like taking rabbits out of hats or stuff?" He could hardly see that being an important part of his life, or a secret worth hiding eleven years.

"No, that's illusionism. Tricks of light, hidden things from the public done only for spectacle's purpose. The magic I'm talking about is this..." She dug her hand into her pocket. For a moment, Harry expected her to take out a dove or two, but when she pulled them out, her hands were empty.

"Oh... Where's my wand?" She asked.

Blaise quickly bounced to the table, grabbed the stick and ran back to her mother, giving it to her.

"Thank you..." She pointed the stick at a wooden chair and said loudly "*Wingardium Leviosa!*"

It was the first magic Harry Potter saw. A simple levitation charm, performed on a chair. The object in question floated a foot above the ground, bouncing a bit at the wand's movements.

It's a trick. Harry thought, walking up to it. *There's probably a cable or something holding it up... and someone's playing with it to make it move.* Yeah, that must be it.

However, he found nothing. The chair truly was floating.

"Accio chair!"

The chair suddenly stilled and flew toward Mrs Zabini, who stopped it with her hand. The tip of her wand tapped softly against the chair and, before he could blink, the wooden object began dancing in a disorganized and arrhythmic tap dance. Another tap and it stopped moving, turning back into a docile chair that a simple wave of her wand sent back to it's original location.

"Convinced yet?" Mrs Zabini asked, a slight smirk on her face at Harry's stunned face.

"...uh... yeah.... Will you show me how to do that?" He asked, a hopeful look appearing in his eyes.

"Nope." At his disappointed look, she continued "The professors of Hogwarts will."

"Hogwarts?"

"Yup! The school of witchcraft and wizardry."

"There's a school?!" He asked, surprised, before cursing himself in the non-magical sense for being stupid.

She smiled at him and nodded, adding a friendly, yet quite sarcastic,

"What, you think I taught myself that? Oh, having a chair tap-dance is so useful in parties, really. I spent three years learning how..." The sarcasm vanished "No, really, it's only use is giving you a good grade in charms. And even then, mine only gave me seventy percent."

"Why so low? The teacher must be tough..." Harry reasoned. For some reason, it made Mrs Zabini laugh.

"Tough? I've seen Puffskeins tougher than him! uh... you'll learn about these at Hogwarts." She added at his puzzled look.

"And how is it? Hogwarts I mean? What does it look like?"

Mrs Zabini started talking about the school and its mysteries, its secret passages, its students, anything she could find. Harry was a good listener and didn't speak other than making supportive "cool!" and "wicked!". Somewhere there, Blaise came and listened in. They learned that the admittance age was of 11 and Harry cheered loudly.

"I'm gonna be eleven soon!"

"I'm already eleven... does that mean we'll be at Hogwarts together?" Blaise asked with a grin.

Mrs Zabini nodded. "Most likely."

They cheered for a moment, then she continued her story, passing over the ghosts ("Real ghosts?! Nice!"), Quidditch ("Flying brooms? Like these you mean?") and the house points...

"...bad conduit makes your house lose points, good behavior makes it win."

"House?" Harry asked.

"There are four houses." She began again, a smile on her face. Apparently, she enjoyed talking about her school days. "Ravenclaw are the smart ones... almost always in a book, when they're not with

their boy/girlfriends. The most “romantically involved” house, if you see what I mean. Some of those stories... ugh. I guess it goes with curiosity. Hufflepuff is the house of the loyal ones... and, if you excuse me for a bit of partiality, the idiots. Not that I want to push you to make fun of them, but there are some pretty funny stories like: How much times does it take a Hufflepuff to change a lightbulb. Nobody knows, none of them managed it ye—”

“--Honey...” Mr Zabini, who had also been listening intently, warned, having her go back to her business.

“Oh, sorry... where was I? Oh yeah, I finished Hufflepuff. Ok. Gryffindor, the house of the brave and the courageous, no comments here. And then there’s Slytherin. Some people say it’s the bad house; don’t listen to them, it’s not that bad. The cunning and the ambitious go there and so did I.”

“If someone like you came out of Slytherin, then they can’t be THAT bad.” Harry noted, making her blush slightly.

Soon, it was time for him to go. He noted with a pleasant surprise that the Dursleys didn’t even know he was gone; they had simply assumed he was in the kitchen. Good thing Dudley and his gang were out terrorizing some of Mrs Figg’s cats. It was really a lucky break, and he suspected Mrs Zabini had had a little fun wand waving around with his luck.

“Nope, they really can’t be that bad...”

The next day, a disgusting odor covered number four, privet drive. It smelled like paint, but the Dursleys hadn’t planned on painting anything until a couple of years. Puzzled, Harry followed his nose to the kitchen where he found the source; the sink, in which floated old clothes in the grey waters.

“What’s that?” He asked his aunt.

“It’s your uniform.”

Uniform? Had they heard of Hogwarts too?

Then, his memory came back and hit him behind the head. While Dudley was being sent to Smelting, the same college in which uncle Vernon had done his studies, Harry was sent to the closest (and cheapest) one. He contemplated the option of telling her about Hogwarts, when he decided to hold himself back. Better not; it might get the Zabini (and himself) in trouble. He decided to play along, to make sure she wasn't suspicious.

"It has to be washed in cold water?"

"Don't be stupid." She snapped. "I just dyed Dudley's old clothes. It'll be enough for you, not too different from the others."

Harry took another look and frowned. Good thing he wasn't going to that school, he'd have looked stupid. He could see it now: Harry Potter, the elephant skin kid.

Uncle Vernon and Dudley walked in, wrinkled their noses at the horrible smell coming from the sink. The man unfolded his newspaper as usual and Dudley sat down, practically crashing the poor chair. Harry couldn't help but chuckle at the thought of a chair running away from the overweight boy; might make a good joke for after he learned how to do it.

The mail slot in the door squeaked loudly, signaling the post had arrived.

"Go get the mail, Dudley." Vernon muttered, not taking his nose from out of his newspaper. One point for Ravenclaw, a dozen more for Hufflepuff, Harry thought with a mental smirk.

"Harry can get it." Dudley frowned.

"Go get the mail, boy." Vernon muttered.

"Dudley can get it." Harry frowned, imitating the fat boy.

"Hit him with your stick, Dudley." Vernon muttered.

Harry avoided the stick and went to get the mail, muttering under his breath. He couldn't wait to get out of there. He took the mail, which was three letters; a post card from "aunt" Marge, Vernon's sister, a bill and...

He beamed. A letter for him, in the same thick and yellow parchment Mrs Zabini had told him about, with his... *gulp* *VERY* exact address written in emerald ink:

Mr H. Potter

The cupboard under the stairs

4, privet drive

Little Whinging

Surrey

He turned it around and found the Hogwarts emblem, just as she had described it; a raven, a lion, a badger and a snake around the letter "H".

"What's taking so long!?" Vernon shouted from inside. Quickly, Harry hid the letter inside his shirt, for once glad he wore such baggy clothes.

"Nothing!" He lied, running inside with the two other letters.

He had to wait until long after breakfast, since Dudley's gang once again invaded the house, to open the letter. In fact, he once again had to sneak out through the window, ending up face-to-face with...

"I thought Muggles used the front door."

...Blaise, who gave him a friendly, yet mocking, smile.

"They do, so do pigs, apparently." He pointed up at Dudley's room window, where the fat boy's back was visible. Blaise stifled a giggle.

"C'mon, let's leave your relatives... did you get your letter too?"

He nodded in happiness, showing her the letter in question. She beamed too, grabbed his arm and pulled him away from number four, away from Privet drive, stopping only when they were deep in the closest park, where they sat down on a wooden bench and unfolded their letters, reading them for the very first time.

Hogwarts, school of witchcraft and wizardry

Headmaster: Albus Dumbledore

**Order of Merlin, first class, Grand Sorcerer, Chief Warlock,
Supreme Mugwump, National Confederation of Wizards**

Mister Potter

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted to Hogwarts, school of witchcraft and wizardry. You will find a list of the necessary books and materials you must have for the school year.

Please go to platform 9³/₄, King's cross on September first to board the Hogwarts express. We are waiting for your owl for the thirty-first of July at the latest.

Minerva McGonagall, Deputy headmistress

Harry and Blaise looked up at the same time and smiled. Actually, beamed would be a better word. He re-read it and frowned.

"What do they mean, 'We are waiting for your owl'?"

"Oh yeah, we didn't tell you... we use owls to carry mail. You can use our family owl, Athena. She's a bit rough with strangers, but trustworthy with mail."

"Thanks Blaise." He said with a smile. "We're going to Hogwarts!"

They walked back to number five Privet drive, carefully avoiding the possibility of being seen from the neighboring house, and literally barged through the door, shouting "MOM!" or "MRS. ZABINI!" depending on who. (A/N: Go guess who said what. Harry said mom. J/K!) She was delighted and quickly guided them to the locked basement, where Harry found a mine of magical items.

The walls were covered by large bookshelves filled with vials full of odd substances not unlike the content of yesterday's box, large, intimidating books with gold titles and moving covers, or moving pictures of people dressed in black robes. The boxes in this room were all open and piled up in the corner. They were, as far as he knew, the only empty boxes of the house. And near the only clear window of the room, a mere crack near the roof, a cage was laying down on an upside-down box. The eagle owl inside looked a little more than upset.

Mrs Zabini walked up to her, smiling apologetically. "The muggle-repellent potion hasn't been sprayed on the windows yet, Athena. I promise you'll be out of the basement as soon as it's ready, but I can't risk the muggles next door seeing you."

The owl merely replied with an indignant hoot, before turning to Harry and glaring at him with her big red eyes, making him flinch. That owl had a nasty glare.

"Can you carry two letters for us?" Mrs Zabini asked next, showing the owl the two small letters. "It'll stretch your wings a bit."

As an answer, the bird took her talon out of the cage, allowing Mrs Zabini to tie up the letters. As soon as it was comfortably installed, Athena stretched her long cream and brown wings and jumped on Mrs Zabini's arm, who threw her out, allowing her to take flight. Minutes later, the bird was gone.

Harry spent a few more hours with the Zabinis until it was dinner time. He left after saying goodbye to the two-third magical family, then stealthily walked inside number four. However, it wasn't quite stealthily enough, as the first sight that welcomed him was Vernon's irate and purple face. He gulped audibly.

Days passed, and no news of Harry came to their neighbors. The boy didn't even get out of number four, which was highly unusual for him. On the thirtieth, she got pissed.

“Dumbledore, it makes a whole week he hasn’t gone out from number four now. As far as we know, something bad has happened to him. I request permission to investigate the matter personally.”

“And if I refuse it, you’ll still go, right?” He asked, his blue eyes twinkling.

“You know me too well, Headmaster.” She replied, not shifting from her position; arms crossed over her chest, a fierce unreadable glare on her face. A stance she had learned at Hogwarts from a two years senior Slytherin housemate. What was his name... Smellus Snake... no, that was the nickname those four bloody annoying teacher’s pet Gryffindors gave him.

Bah, there would be more time for memories later. ‘Set your priorities, girl!’ she snapped at herself.

The old man’s head in the fireplace sighed.

“Is there any way you can hold yourself back until tonight, midnight? Because I sent someone to gather him already. You remember Rubeus of course.”

“Hagrid, yes... met him once or twice. Heard he a bloody alcoholic, but since those rumors came deep in the dark side of Slytherin, I’d rather not have an opinion.” She said frankly. Her husband gave her an odd and reprimanding look.

Dumbledore nodded, his eyes twinkling a bit. “While Hagrid does tend to have a bit of a drinking problem in time of stress, he is far from being alcoholic.”

“Oh. Maybe I can hold back, if you allow Hagrid to use physical force against his relatives, I’ll be glad to watch.” She said. “That bloody kid of theirs tried to throw a rock at me. He’s lucky to be alive.”

“Indeed... people have been known to have mysterious fits of pain after throwing less harmful things than rocks at you...”

“If you count Rictusempera harmless... I hated that curse and he knew it!”

“Anyhow, as much fun as it is to remember your time at Hogwarts with mister Black’s first attempts at hexing, Elmira, I do believe it’s time for your husband to tie you up so you don’t go charging off into number four Privet drive. Wait until Hagrid is there, then join in.” He said, his eyes twinkling playfully. “And you may *not* harm the Dursleys.” He added.

“Fine.” She grumbled, a bit more than angry from not being allowed to hurt her neighbors. Whoever said neighbor wars were a urban legend clearly had their theory shoved up their... um... ok, back to the fic now.

About ten minutes later, the two Zabinis were watching TV. Twenty minutes later, she was constantly giving looks at the clock. Thirty minutes later, she was twitching and looking at number four, mumbling about ‘bloody muggles’ and ‘slow alcoholics’. After an hour, she found herself handcuffed to the chair she was sitting on, struggling against it. And there was still four hours left to wait.

Near the very end, Mr Zabini clearly wished he was able to do magic; the handcuffs were skillfully broken, the leather straps had been ducked under and he was now holding the strong woman back, barely, while Blaise was in complete hysterics behind them, rolling on the floor.

“Dario, let GO OF ME!!” She shouted in anger. “C’mon, who knows what Harry’s going through!!”

“N...No, I won’t... You hear what Dumbledore said, right? You...j-just.. waaaahhh!” with one final push, she managed to free herself from his grasp and run out of the house, straight to the neighboring building. “ELMIRA! COME BACK HERE!”

She ignored him and took out her wand with in a practiced and fast manner, walking toward the brown brick house in which the Dursleys live in a step not unlike those of a female soldier.

“Good thin’ I came ‘ere early, eh ‘Imira?” A rough voice came from behind her. There, standing on the sidewalk stood the most enormous man she had ever seen, towering nearly two feet above her. He had a thick and messy black beard, large hands and little black eyes like scarabs that oozed amusement.

“Hagrid! Good, you’re here...” She rubbed her hands together and smirked. “Let’s get Harry then.”

Vernon Dursley cursed loudly as loud knocking shook the house. His wife was getting up, having been woken up as well. And a loud “MOOOM! DAAAAD!” indicated Dudley was awake too. He opened the door, practically slamming the doorknob into the wall. Whoever had woke him and his family up would pay dearly. Angry, he rumbled down the stairs, not caring about the darn boy locked up inside the cupboard. He roughly shoved the door open, glaring at whoever was behind, while shouting

“What the hell do you think you’re doing!?!”

Or that had been his intention. His words stopped somewhere in “hell” because of the sight before him. His eyes glaring in an unintelligent and barbaric way, the tallest, burliest man he had ever seen stood, fists clenched. Behind him, their neighbor’s wife stood, glaring just as angrily, an odd stick in her hand.

“Where’s Harry Potter?” The gigantic man asked, forcing his way through the doorway that was easily too small for him.

“W...Who? I have no...” Vernon’s voice was oddly high-pitched, before he corrected himself and tried to stand up against the trespasser; Stand up to your fears and you’ll go far, so had his father said.

Those words were proven true when Hagrid grabbed Vernon by the collar and roughly threw him on the nearest wall. You’ll go far, indeed, as long as there is no walls.

“Where’s Harry?” Elmira Zabini asked in a much more friendly voice that still held a tint of menace to it.

“I’m in here!” Harry’s muffled voice came from the cupboard. “Help!”

She gasped in horror and quickly ran to the cupboard in question, finding a large padlock holding it steadily. Not wasting any time, she waved her wand in front of it and tapped it, saying “Alohamora!”. The lock was magically opened and Harry quickly pushed his way out, breathing a sigh of relief.

“Mrs Zabini! Thank you!!!” He squealed, hugging her closely. Petunia and Dudley were now standing in the middle of the stairs, looking at the scene with interest and fear.

“It’s nothing... I just wish I could have gotten here faster. Where are all of your things? ‘cause I’m bailing you out of here.”

“I have them all on me.” He replied with a scowl. Mrs Zabini nearly crushed his arms in her anger.

“Eh, ‘Imira, I dun’t think Dumbledore allowed yeh to do that...”

She turned around and glared at him. It looked odd that someone as large as Hagrid fear a woman who was easily dwarfed by him. Then again, when magic was concerned, the physically strong might not always win.

“Y...You...’re... one... of them!!” Aunt Petunia shouted at the top of her high-pitched voice, both in volume and squeakiness, pointing at Mrs Zabini’s wand.

“You mean a witch? Yup, I am. And I’ll be taking Harry for the rest of the summer, thanks.” She replied. Not waiting another word, she led Harry outside.

“Witch?” Dudley asked, puzzled.

“B...But... we’re his last relatives...we decide if he goes...”

She glared at them, making them tremble in terror. The fat Dudley tried to hide behind his thin mother.

“You people are lucky Dumbledore didn’t allow me to hurt you, or else you’d have already been cursed all the way to the south pole, passing the north pole twice.” She said in a low, menacing voice, her fist clenched around her wand that emitted angry white sparks. “You may be the only family he has left, but he sure as hell ain’t staying here in the cupboard ‘till September 1.”

“Septemb... ABSOLUTELY NOT!” Petunia shrieked. “I refuse to let *him* learn all of that *rubbish!*”

“What does she mean?” Vernon asked.

“She wants to send him my bloody sister’s school I’ve told you about!”

Vernon’s reaction was quite funny, and quite as Harry had expected it to be. The violet tint of his face quickly paled into white, almost as white as a sheet. Then, it deepened into an angry red. Buy your new “*Cameleonus Vernonis*” here, today! Two pounds, an affair! More like a scam, pardon me.

“HE IS **NOT** GOING *ANYWHERE!!!*” Uncle Vernon shouted, shaking in rage. Harry noted, with satisfaction, that his arms were fixated on the witch’s wand, which was still popping out sparks.

“Harry’s name’s in Hogwarts’ list since his birth. I dun’ think a muggle like yeh can do anythin’ ‘bout it.” Hagrid said. “He will go to Hogwarts and will learn magic under the greatest wizard o’ our time, Albus Dumble—”

“I REFUSE TO PAY ONE PENNY SO THAT HE CAN LEARN TRICKS FROM AN OLD FOOL—” Vernon started shouting. However, it appeared the last words were out of place when Mrs Zabini’s wand pointed directly toward him and Hagrid’s large hands went flying for his neck, grabbing him by the collar and lifting him up four feet above the ground.

“NEVER... INSULT... ALBUS DUMBLEDORE... IN... FRONT... O’... ME!” Hagrid bellowed, probably shaking the house’s foundations. Another rough push and Uncle Vernon went flying off, slamming against the very same wall as the first time. You’ll go far, probably more than once, Vernon’s father should have added.

Mrs Zabini looked satisfied, much to Harry’s annoyance. He had wanted to see what magic could have done to his uncle. She lowered her wand and walked toward aunt Petunia, who looked like she was about to wet her nightdress.

“Before you get any ideas about involving the police, need I remind you that you’ve broken muggle laws yourself? I think locking Harry up in a cupboard qualifies as ‘Disrespect of children’s rights’ and can score quite high in the ‘sentence’ category...” She winked at them, then walked Harry out of the house.

Before closing the door on them, Hagrid added a “good nigh” that looked very faked. Unable to hold himself back any longer, Harry burst out laughing.

“Did you see Aunt Petunia’s face?” He asked, beaming. This easily scored as the best moment of his life. Not that it was hard; any moment outside the house, away from the Dursleys scored pretty high.

“That was the most fun I’ve ‘ad in quite a while.” Hagrid noted with a smile. The boy liked him already. “Imira, do yeh mind if I stayed at yer place fer the nigh’? Professor Dumbledore asked meh to get sumthin’ fer him at Gringotts, I’ll help Harry get his stuff at the same time... How ‘bout it?”

“I had to go to Diagon Alley myself tomorrow... but you’re more than welcome to stay the night... I’ll expand the sofa for you, ok? Harry, you’ll sleep in the guest room.”

Both wizards nodded. Harry almost expected to hear a “yer the boss” from Hagrid.

He went to sleep easily that night. For the first time for as long as he could remember, he had a nice bed, comfortable pillows, no spiders or any nasty surprises. He let out a happy sighed and closed his eyes, moments before sleep overtook him.

Chapter 1: *Diagon Alley*

That morning, Harry Potter was quite happy to be woken up not by Aunt Petunia's shrill screaming for him to hurry his arse up, but by Mr Zabini's friendly voice, asking him to get up.

"Slept well?" He asked.

"Better than ever." Harry admitted with a smile, taking a peek out the window.

The sun was apparently already quite high up and its rays oozed through the thin curtains. He was surprised it hadn't been what had woke him up. The electric alarm clock showed it was nearly nine in the morning. No wonder he felt very rested.

Mr Zabini walked out of the door, throwing a set of black robes behind him. "Those used to be my wife's." He told Harry. "You'll look less suspicious with those on than with the clothes you're wearing now."

"They're Mrs Zabini's? Aren't they woman clothes?"

"Can you honestly tell me if there's any difference between the eleven years old body of a girl and a boy? There's just as much difference on the robes." He said good naturedly, before leaving out of the door.

Harry nodded and smiled, putting on the robes. He decided it felt too odd not to wear anything under them, so he wore his cousin's baggy clothes as well. He walked down the stairs into the kitchen, where a magically enlarged chair was holding Hagrid's imposing figure as he ate a monumental breakfast. Blaise looked a bit scared of him, but tried not to show it.

"Harry! There yeh are!" He said, beaming. "'been waitin' fer yeh!"

"Sorry if I'm late..." He began, but Hagrid wouldn't hear it.

"Nonsense! Sleep as long as yeh want, yer not with those bloody pigs yeh have as relatives. Anyway, we're not late yet!"

Breakfast was delicious, much better than anything Aunt Petunia could get. Eggs, bacon, toasts, ham and a bucket of fruits covered the table. He took a bit of everything. Blaise handed everyone a bag of Bertie Blott's every flavor beans to finish it all and they spent half an hour enjoying (or being disgusted) by the flavors. Harry hit an

incredible lucky streak, having strawberry, chocolate and caramel before hitting troll snot.

Soon, it was time to go. The family got in their car, since "Hagrid is too big for the fireplace". Harry didn't quite understand about that, yet fully understood how large the man was when he tried to sit on the back seat, taking more than half of it by himself and practically having to roll himself up so he'd fit. Harry sat in front and Blaise at the back, though he had tried to do it otherwise. It was good thing Mr Zabini decided to stay home; the car looked like it was about to be crushed, or throw them out in protest.

He risked a peek behind as they rolled away, smirking at the Dursley's faces peeking out of the window. He couldn't stop himself from opening the window and waving at them mockingly, then settled down in a satisfied manner as everyone burst out laughing.

It took about half an hour of laughs and fun for them to reach their destination on Charing Cross Road: an apparently disused, tiny pub called the leaky cauldron, looking very poor compared to the disk store and the large library it was stuck between. It was quite hard to spot, probably impossible if you didn't know it was there.

"That's... it?" He asked, a little disappointed.

"Not quite." Mrs Zabini replied, walking in and leading the kids through.

The inside looked just as dark and miserable as the outside, if not more. The only features of this room were wooden tables, wooden chairs and a bar, all of it dimly lit by the pale flickering flames on half-burned through chandeliers hanging from the roof. It was almost empty, with only a barman, few old women giving them odd looks and two men, one of which bore a large purple turban.

"Hagrid! Elmira! What a surprise!" The barman said, jumping over the bar and walking up to them. "Will you be staying or is it straight to Diagon alley?"

"No thanks, Tom." Mrs Zabini, her face strict. "I have to get my daughter and Harry's things for Hogwarts..."

“Oh yeah, the little lady... and... by gosh, is that who I think it is? Harry Potter?!”

Harry gave him an odd look and noticed the man was staring at his scar. The other occupants of the bar also became very quiet, while the only young woman openly gasped and got up.

“uh... yeah? What’s up with that?” He asked, puzzled.

Immediately, he was surrounded by people, trying to shake his hand, asking him questions, praising him for no reason. He gave a pleading look at Mrs Zabini, who understood and took out her wand, pointing it at the slightly more nervous crowd.

“Listen here. I’m under orders from Dumbledore to protect this boy. We have no time for this, so clear the way and let us through.” She snapped. Harry gave her a thankful and slightly impressed look. She could be VERY imposing when she wanted.

The group moved aside, letting them go through. Harry gave one final look at the crowd, before hitting Hagrid’s leg. The gigantic man had stopped.

“Professor Quirrel! What a surprise!” He said, beaming at the man with a turban.

‘Professor?’ Harry thought, looking at the man. He looked nervous, as if afraid Hagrid would turn into some kind of demon and attack him. He probably taught something calm and steady, like Potions.

Hagrid turned to Harry and smiled. “This’s professor Quirrel. He’ll be yer DADA teacher fer the year.”

“DADA?”

“Defense against the dark arts.” Mrs Zabini clarified, standing in the doorway.

“P...P...leasure to m...meet you, H...Harry Potter...” The man stuttered. Harry was surprised he was going to teach something like defense; he looked like the kind of man who was afraid of his shadow. “It will be an H...Honor to teach you t...this y...year... though I d...don’t think y...you need it m...much...”

Before Harry could ask, Mrs Zabini grabbed him by the arm and pulled him out through the back door.

Once outside, Harry turned to the adults.

“Ok. Just what happened back there?” He snapped, blocking the way.

“I guess it’s no use hiding it.” Mrs Zabini sighed. “Let’s go somewhere more comfortable though. Anyone up for ice cream?”

Harry looked around. The only things objects there were trash boxes. There was something odd about this back alley, and he quickly guessed what; the only entrance or exit was through the door they had taken. It was completely closed.

Hagrid took out an... umbrella...? And tapped on the brick wall.

“Three up, two across...” He counted, tapping one of them twice. For a second, nothing happened, but then the bricks started moving, creating an archway through the wall. Behind it was the most breathtaking sight Harry had ever seen.

Witches and wizards, everywhere, looking inside shops and restaurants that were obviously not normal. The air was reeking with magic, Harry could almost smell it.

“Welcome to Diagon Alley, Harry!” Hagrid said with a smile.

The boy was looking around, eyes wide, at everything around him. The shop in front of them announced: “Cauldrons, every size: copper, pewter, silver – Self-stirring – Foldable models”. An small and slightly overweight lady was looking through the window of the apothecary, just in front of the cauldron shop, muttering:

“seventeen sickles for an ounce of Dragon Liver... They’re mad...”

They passed in front of the “magical menagerie” out of which loud hoots could be heard, from various owls staring out the window with their large yellow eyes. A large group of kids his age were assembled in front of “Quality Quidditch supplies”, looking at something through the window.

“Look at that... the new Nimbus 2000... the fastest broom yet...”

They stopped at a restaurant directly in front of a robe shop and sat down at one of the tables outside. A very odd man walked up to them. He was grey, completely grey, like someone had filmed him with a black and white camera and it had accidentally affected him. That, and the fact that he could see through him.

"Mrs Zabini! Hagrid! What a pleasant surprise! Anything I can do for you?" He asked.

"I'll have a strawberry sundae, please." Mrs Zabini replied with a smile.

"Same here!" Blaise shouted.

"Ahh, figures... the usual craving, given from mother to daughter." The man said, flashing them a wink. Mrs Zabini blushed bright red.

"Nuthin' fer me, thanks." Hagrid said. "Have to go teh Gringotts after. Never got used teh those carts."

He gave him a sympathetic look before turning to Harry.

"Vanilla ice cream." Harry said. "And... how come you're transparent?"

"I'm dead, that's why." The man replied cheerfully, like he was talking about his shirt.

As he moved away, Harry noticed he wasn't walking; he floated about two inches above the ground. His leg passed right through a chair and he didn't even notice.

"Wicked... a real ghost!" Harry said, in awe.

"So? First time you see one? My great-great-grandmother is a ghost." Blaise said with a sly smile. "course, she favors haunting her own house near the Mediterranean sea, even through it's about to fall around her. Salt air isn't good for wood."

Harry gave her a surprised look, but their orders came before he could speak. They ate in silence for a while, until Mrs Zabini took one final bite out of her sundae and started talking.

“You wanted to know why everyone recognized you, Harry?” She asked.

He nodded, dropping the spoon in his bowl. Blaise looked like she knew the story as she continued happily munching on the large pink sundae.

“Ten years ago, the wizarding world was living in a time of terror and fear.” Mrs Zabini began, already taking all of Harry’s attention. “The forces of light and of darkness were in war. On one side, Albus Dumbledore and the ministry’s aurors. On the other, a powerful and evil dark wizard by the name of Voldemort (Hagrid flinched, almost knocking his chair over) and his death eaters. For thirteen years, the war took place. Every day, there was another death, another disappearance. Families were broken, killed, betrayed... it was a time of uncertainty: How can you be sure your neighbor isn’t a death eater? Maybe your wife or husband is one and you didn’t notice... or maybe your brother?”

Harry frowned. It sure didn’t look that way now.

“On Halloween 1981, when you were just one year old, Voldemort (Hagrid flinched again) came to Godric’s hollow in hope of killing James and Lily Potter. He killed them both, then when he tried to kill you... the same curse that killed hundreds didn’t work; it backfired on him, ripping him of his power. Weakened, almost dead, Voldemort (Hagrid flinched and glared at Mrs Zabini) fled to somewhere in the west, leaving you well alive with only a scar... a lightning-shaped scar on your forehead.”

Harry unknowingly pulled his bangs over it, hiding it. “How come it didn’t work?”

“No one really knows... The spell was powerful enough to blast your parents’ house in bits, but you survived; something in you defeated him, Harry. That’s why you’re famous. You’re the boy-who-lived. The one who defeated Voldemort...”

“Please don’t say his name anymore...” Hagrid whined.

She shot him a look and told him to “Grow up”, which he certainly didn’t need to, and got up. “I think we should gather your things

now... I'll help you get your money, then I have something to do in Knockturn alley. An old 'friend' to visit." She said glumly, finishing the melted sundae in one, undignified gulp.

"I'll help 'em get their stuff, 'Imira." Hagrid said. "All I gotta do is get the s-...sumthin' at Gringott', then I'm free."

"Good, just remember to keep the you-know-what a secret." She said, giving him a concentrated-of-warning look. He nodded a big nervously.

"uh, sure... did I ever give away secrets?" He asked, trying to look assuring.

"Yes you did. Now off you go, I'll pay." She pushed them out of the restaurant. "Oh, and Blaise, here. Take this." She threw her a small key.

Feeling a bit bold, Harry walked up to Hagrid, almost running because of the gigantic steps the man was doing.

"What's the you-know-what?" He asked.

"Oh, it's the.... Nice try, Harry." Hagrid shot him a glare, and the boy just shrugged.

"Just asking." He said with an innocent smile. Blaise was already being a bad influence.

They walked about a minute, ending up in front of a large building bearing the name "GRINGOTTS" in large, carved letters that shone in gold. Huge bronze doors pierced the walls up a flight of marble stairs. Two odd-looking, crimson and gold-clad creatures were standing guard there, nodding a bit as the trio passed by them.

"What are they?" Harry whispered, as if afraid they would take offense to his lack of knowledge.

"They're goblins." Blaise answered, whispering just as much. "They guard this bank."

Another problem suddenly arose to Harry. In all his life with the Dursleys, he had amassed barely enough money to buy himself a

newspaper. He didn't nearly have enough money to buy all of those things!

"Uh, Hagrid, I don't have enough money to buy anything..."

"Why do yeh think we're here fer, eh?" He asked, an amused look on his face.

"...I know, but I don't have anything to start an account with..."

"No need teh worry 'bout that, Harry! Yeh already have one here." At his surprised face, Hagrid continued "What, yeh didn't think yer parents left yeh nuthin', righ'?"

They walked up to a pair of giant silver doors, the last ones. A poem was written on it.

Enter, stranger, but take heed
Of what awaits the sin of greed
For those who take, but do not earn,
Must pay most dearly in their turn.
So if you seek beneath our floors
A treasure that was never yours,
Thief, you have been warned, beware
Of finding more than treasure there.

"em Goblins never do sumthin' in half." Hagrid commented. "Gringotts is the safest place in the world fer anyhtin' yeh want to keep safe... 'cept maybe Hogwarts."

"I'll bet..." Harry said, a bit nervous. What did it mean, 'finding more than treasure there'? He had a distinct impression he didn't want to find out.

Hagrid led them trough the slippery main chamber of Gringotts' bank. On both sides, Goblins were working on checks, stamping periodically with the Gringotts seal, weighing coins or examining precious stones. The giant man stopped in front of the only one on the farthest wall of the bank's main hall.

"Hello, I'd like teh withdraw in Mr Potter an' Mrs Zabini's vaults.

“You got the keys?”

“Yeah, sure, jus’ a sec...” He dug his large hands in the many pockets of his coat and noises could be heard; a metallic clang, a high-pitched squeak, an indignant hoot, a plastic bag’s ruffling...

Finally, he pulled out a tiny key and handed it to the Goblin as Blaise gave him hers.

“Then, there’s a letter from Professor Dumbledore. It’s about the yeh-know-what in vault 713.”

The Goblin read it and nodded. “All right. Griphook will take you to the vaults.” He motioned to the single Goblin guarding one of the many metal doors in the back. After being handed the keys, Griphook led them through the door, down to what looked like a traditional mine passage with a rail and metal carts that looked EXACTLY like the ones shown in cartoons.

Griphook got on and motioned for them to do the same. As soon as everyone was settled in the car – not without difficulty in Hagrid’s case – , it sped forward by itself at an infernal speed. The path separated in many different tunnels, each exactly alike. Blaise was cheering, arms high like it was some kind of rollercoaster, her long brown hair whipping behind her. Hagrid didn’t seem to be enjoying himself one bit, however.

They veered left and Harry caught sight of a gigantic lizard, glaring at them angrily. Blaise saw it too and gasped “COOL!”

“What WAS that thing?!”

“That was a dragon!” She said, beaming. “I thought it was just rumors that they had dragons down here, but they do!”

“Blimey! I missed it!” Hagrid cursed. “Oh, I wish I had a drag’n, I dream ‘bout it since I’m a little kid...” He started looking longingly at the path they had just taken, before the cart shook violently and he quickly remembered where he was.

The cart screeched to a stop in front of vault 566 and Griphook got off, motioning for Blaise to get up. She did and took out a leather pouch that fit in her palm.

“Remember, not more than 35 galleons.” The Goblin said as he opened the door, revealing a reasonable amount of gold, silver and brown coins Mrs Zabini had told him were Galleons, Sickles and Knuts. That and the most odd number that made each; twenty-nine Knuts for a sickle, seventeen Sickles for a Galleon. She claimed it was easy, but Harry was in the opinion of her husband; who the heck had decided such odd and uneven numbers!?

“Fine..” Blaise sighed, filling her pouch with coins, her cheeks a bit pink. When it was full, she went back in the cart as Griphook closed the vault and followed her.

“Why was there a limit on your vault?” Harry asked, a little puzzled.

“It’s our family vault and mom has a bit of a spending problem... and stop being nosy!” She huffed, her cheeks bright crimson. Harry chuckled.

They made another stop at vault 713. It was much different than the Zabini’s vault. There was no lock, nothing that would betray it wasn’t a huge metal plate on the wall.

“Stand back!” Griphook warned, walking toward the vault and touching it with his finger. There was a flash and the door disappeared, revealing an almost empty vault behind. He turned around, facing to the humans.

“If anyone but a goblin tried to open this door, they’d be sucked in and would be trapped inside the vault.”

“Do you check if there’s people inside?”

“About every ten years.” He commented with a smirk that could only be qualified as sadistic. Harry gulped. Now he knew what the poem meant.

Hagrid stepped up to the vault; the only thing there was a small package, which he took and hid in one of the inside pockets of his

large coat. Neither Harry or Blaise bother to ask; it would have been futile anyway.

Once again, they were on the 'infernal rollercoaster', veering sharp angled turns, almost getting thrown off once or twice – It was like he was glued to the seat; he felt like he was gonna get thrown off, but his body refused to obey the laws of physics. They stopped pretty soon in front of vault 687. Harry and Griphook got off, the goblin opening the door for the boy to access whatever riches his parents had left him.

Ok. Pause here.

Harry Potter had lived all his youth constantly hearing he was costing too much to the Dursley household, even though they didn't even pay him new clothes, nor did they ever give him gift or anything costly. It was like the oxygen demands of his breathing was too much for them to afford, even though they gave a mountain of presents to Dudley twice a year, and whatever he wanted anytime during the year.

Given this background, imagine Harry's surprise when he saw the mountain of gold, bronze and silver coins piled up in his vault. He was rich. Very rich. Beyond even his wildest dreams. Unpause, please.

He filled up his pouch with coins and walked back to the cart who's occupants were just as stunned as him.

As the cart took them away from the vault and back to the surface, the first words Harry said were "I wonder what uncle Vernon's reaction would be if he knew?", sending Blaise in a fit of laughter. Hagrid would have laughed if he didn't suddenly feel sick and Griphook didn't even move.

Once out of Gringotts, Hagrid left, claiming his stomach was protesting too much for him to move and that he was gonna sit down a bit, not before asking them to go to Madam Malkin's robes for all occasion.

"You got your list, right?" Blaise asked him.

Harry nodded and pulled his book list from his pocket.

Hogwarts school of witchcraft and wizardry

Uniform

List of clothes the first year students have to wear

- 1) three black work robes, normal model
- 2) a pointed hat (black)
- 3) A pair of protective gloves (in dragon skin)
- 4) A winter cape (Black with silver fastenings)

Each clothing will have to have a badge with the student's name

Books and manuals

The students are required to get the following books.

Standard Book of Spells, The, grade 1 by Miranda Goshawk

History of magic, A by Bathilda Bagshott

Magical theory by Aldabert Waffling

Begginner's guide to Transfiguration, A by Emeric Switch

One thousand magical herb and fungi by Phyllida Spore

Magical drafts and potions by Arsenius Jigger

Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection, The by Quentin Trimble

Fantastic Beasts and Where toFind Them by Newt Scamander

Material

1 magic wand

1 cauldron (Standard pewter model, size 2)

1 box of vials in glass or crystal

1 telescope

1 copper balance

The students can also bring an owl OR a cat OR a toad OR a rat

(A/N: Corrected JK's error here, my beta is forcing me to say she's the one who found it)

PLEASE TAKE NOTE THAT FIRST YEAR STUDENTS AREN'T ALLOWED TO HAVE THEIR OWN BROOM.

"Aww... we can't have a broom yet..." Blaise whined, pouting slightly. "I wanted to bring my Cleansweep 7..."

They found themselves inside the robe shop within the next minute. Madam Malkin was as squat witch wearing mauve robes. She smiled at them as they entered.

"Hogwarts too?" She asked. "The boy's side is that way..." She pointed right. "...and I'll start with the little missy here."

She led Blaise away to a set of stools in the much more colorful section of the robe shop. Harry went to the other side, which was much duller in colors.

Standing on one of the stools, wearing a bored air, another boy was waiting. He turned to Harry, his ice-blue eyes betraying no emotion but boredom.

“Hey. You’re going to Hogwarts too?” He asked.

The boy looked like he was as old as him, probably another first year. Might as well make more friends before school starts, he reasoned.

“Yeah, although it’s a surprise. Just two weeks ago, I was sure I was a muggle.” Harry said with a smile.

The boy gave him a frowning look. “You’re muggle-born?”

“Na.” He shook his head. “My mom and dad are magical, but they died. I got raised by my relatives and they’re the most unsupportable muggles ever.”

The boy had a satisfied smile and nodded. “The school should only be allowed to us pure bloods. Those from other families aren’t like us, they didn’t get the same education—”

“I don’t think that’s true.” Harry interrupted. “I mean... imagine the chaos if muggle-borns stayed all their life doing accidental magic, not knowing why all that stuff is happening around them. Then there’s the half-bloods who know as much of the muggle world as the magical world... really, I don’t think it’s important.”

“Suit yourself.” The boy shrugged. “got your wand yet?”

“No, Blaise and I are getting them last.”

“Blaise, eh? Your sister?”

“No, my best friend.” He corrected.

“Oh. Come to think about it, I have no idea what your name is... my name is Malfoy. Draco Malfoy. Yours?”

“Har—” “Mr. Malfoy? Your robes are ready.” Madam Malkin interrupted him, her head peeking out.

“Well, it’s been fun. See you at Hogwarts.” Draco said, flashing him a smile and walked out after taking his black robes and pointed hat.

After Harry and Blaise acquired theirs, they went next door, in Flourish & Blotts, to get their books. Hagrid met them at it’s exit and

led them through the apothecary where they bought odd things like powdered unicorn horns, dragon scales, beetle eyes and Armadillo bile. Then, after buying themselves pewter cauldrons – Harry wanted a nice, silver one, but Hagrid had insisted on pewter – they went to Ollivander's wand-making shop (Makers of Fine Wands since 382 B.C.).

A magic wand.

Harry was smiling and Blaise beaming widely as they entered the small, elongated and dusty shop. The wand shop. He was getting his VERY OWN MAGIC WAND. He couldn't believe it. Just two weeks ago, if you have told him he would be getting his magic wand soon, he would have probably pointed out the direction to the nearest asylum for you. But now...

"Rubeus! Rubeus Hagrid! What a pleasant surprise!" an old man said, walking out from the shelves of small boxes. "Oak, sixteen inches, rather bendy, wasn't it?"

"That's right."

"A good wand... It was broken when you got expelled, though, wasn't it?"

Hagrid nodded. "Yes it was, but I kept the pieces, 'f course."

"Yes... and you don't use them, right?" The man shot him a piercing look. Hagrid's hands clenched around his umbrella, which Harry suspected Hagrid had put the pieces in.

"'f course not!" He said quickly, a little nervously. "I'm here to get a wand for miss Zabini and Mr Potter here."

"Ah, miss Zabini, I knew you would come soon... just twenty years ago, your mother came here and picked a 10½', maple wood, dragon heartstring wand... rather springy and a bit too fickle for my liking... it matched with her perfectly..." He mused, before turning to Harry.

"I've been expecting you, mister Potter. I clearly remember the day your mother and father came to get their first wands... She picked a 10¼', willow, rather swishy wand, excellent for charm work."

He was getting closer and closer to Harry, who was getting nervous. The man's piercing silver eyes were a bit unnerving.

"As for your father, he preferred a mahogany, 11' and pliable wand. A bit more powerful and excellent for transfiguration. Then again, when I say preferred... in truth, it's the wand who chooses it's master."

They were so close that their noses were almost touching. Harry could see his reflection in the man's eyes.

"Hmm... so this is where it happened..." He mumbled, tracing Harry's scar with his long finger.

"I'm sorry, I'm the one who sold the wand who did this to you... thirteen inches, yew with a single phoenix feather... a powerful wand, very powerful... and in evil hands... if I had known what this wand would do after coming out of here..." He sighed and clapped his hands, startling everyone. Only now did Harry notice he had barely been whispering. That man was unnerving him.

"Ok, let's begin with miss Zabini here... Your wand arm please..." For about a minute, he and an enchanted tape took the necessary measures (Which kept getting odder and odder, up to the distance between her nostrils) while Blaise patiently waited, her left hand forward. "Try this. Nine inches, dragon heartstring, a bit whippy."

Blaise took it and gave it a wave. Nothing happened. Ollivander immediately took the wand from her hand and gave her another one.

"Ten and a half inches, oak, dragon heartstring. Straight."

Nothing.

It took nearly five minutes, but finally...

"Eleven and a quarter inches, mahogany, dragon heartstring, extremely whippy."

She whipped it; indeed it was, I nearly bent in half. But the important part was the flood of silver sparks that shot out.

"Excellent! A bit fickle and unstable... but considering your family history, it's not a surprise."

Blaise blushed a bit and sat down

“Now, mister Potter...” Ollivander’s piercing silver eyes were on him again, and Harry couldn’t help but shudder. He was *scary*. “Your wand arm.”

He stretched out his right hand. The process repeated, with the enchanted ruler measuring everything that could be measured, from the length of his arm to the wideness of his ears. After a minute, the man stopped the tape, satisfied. He pulled out a box and started giving wands, taking them after nothing happened.

Half an hour later, the chair was overfilled with discarded wands, yet none of them matched with him, while Hagrid patiently read the “Daily Prophet”. Blaise, on the other hand, kept waving her new wand, enjoying the showers of magical sparks.

Finally, Ollivander picked the right one. Eleven inches, phoenix feather, holly wood, supple and easy to handle, or so he said. As soon as Harry grabbed it, he felt like it as his, like a part of him had just been found. In a shower of crimson and gold sparks, the wand proved him right.

“Good! Very good... yes, we have a match... strange though... very strange...”

The man packed the wand away like he had done for Blaise’s, muttering “strange”s as he did so. Finally, Harry gathered enough guts to ask.

“What’s so strange?” He asked.

Ollivander looked at him and frowned.

“I remember every single wand that came out of here, and who it came to. See, the phoenix who’s feather resides in your wand gave only another feather. And that feather is located in the wand that gave you that scar.”

Blaise and Hagrid were both staring wide-eyed. Harry gulped. There was already too much going on around him and Voldemort for his liking.

After paying (a rather handsome amount) for the wands, Hagrid guided them to Magical Menagerie, the pet shop.

"Now, fer yer birthday present." He said to Harry.

"Uh... it's quite all right, Hagrid. Being free from the Dursleys is quite a present already."

"That's the Zabinis, they're the ones housin' yeh. No, I've got sumthin' in mind fer yeh. Not a toad, they've been unpopular fer months. I'm allergic teh cats, but owls are jus' perfect... everyone wants one. Useful 'cause they can carry mail, an' they're very smart teh."

Hagrid led them inside, guiding them between the cages of puffy, orange creatures, long-legged rats that squeaked loudly as they passed by, and toads. An orange, flat-faced cat glared at them from it's cage over the cashier's counter. Blaise squealed and ran toward what looked like a snake with wings, while Hagrid grinned as he found a baby Occamy, a kind of flying snake he knew would measure way to much to put in a cage once adult. He heard the giant moan that it looked like a little dragon. Harry was left alone and, with nothing to do, he wandered.

"Hey look! Sssomeone'sss coming!" He heard a voice say, coming from a rather secluded spot between two shelves of various kinds of owl treats for every specie.

Puzzled, Harry followed his ears to a open-top glass cage, well lit by powerful and warm floating spheres, in which lived a good dozen snakes of all kinds, some brightly colored, some barely visible against the grey leafy ground they crawled on.

"Do you think he'll take one of ussss?" One of them, a rather small, green one asked.

"No idea... he looks too wimpy to be the ssssnake-loving type." A much larger, grey one said.

"Hey!" Harry protested, frowning. "I'm not a wimp."

The snakes looked at each other in surprise.

"He talksss our language!"

“Unbelievable!”

“Ok, maybe he *will* take one of ussss.” The grey one admitted.

“Hey, hold on... I can’t, I can only take a cat, and owl or a toad.”

“Booo-ring! The rule-loving type, eh?” A medium size black and green snake said in a higher-pitched voice than the others, breaking away from the crowd that had amassed in front of the glass.

“No I’m not... it’s just...”

“If you want, you can take one of usss away and no one will notissse... there’sss too many of usss here anyway... Not many people want to take usss with them...” It continued. Harry could have sworn it’s eyes were twinkling. “coursse, a sssmall one would just be boring, and a bigger one wouldn’t be able to come with you unsseen. My ssscales are black, which hides me jussst fine in many sssituationss.”

The other snakes had, by now, caught on his plan and were glaring at him angrily. Harry looked around. No one was looking .

“Ok. Just you. Slide up my arm.”

“Thankiesss, my friend... You won’t regret it...”

Harry felt the reptile slide up under his shirt, settling comfortably for both around his hips, just above his belt. It barely showed, and you really had to know it was there to find it. Satisfied, Harry walked away from the cage, out of which outraged hissing could be heard.

“Harry! There yeh are!” Hagrid’s voice boomed from the owl section.
“We found an owl fer yeh!”

After buying for the snowy white owl Harry would later call Hedwig, Hagrid led them back to the leaky cauldron, where Mrs Zabini was waiting, looking a bit peeved.

“Now, if only he explained to me what they were for... oh, hi kids!” she said, her face going straight from ‘wondering, caution’ to ‘Friendly, safe for most’ in half a second. “Do you have everything?”

“Yeah!” The kids chorused.

“Well, I’ll be off then...” Hagrid said, smiling. “see y’all at Hogwarts!” and he walked out of the front door.

Mrs Zabini led them back to their house through the fireplace and something she called ‘Floo powder’, which he decided was NOT his favorite way of travel, nor was it his two new pets’. Too bumpy, and the soot stains probably took hours to clean. At least he didn’t end up in the wrong fireplace.

As soon as he arrived in his room, he let his books down on his bed and shook the robes with enough strength to force the snake out of there.

“Aww, I was jusst having a nice nap...” It whined.

“Sorry ‘bout that, mister snake... uh... maybe I should give you a name...”

“Yesss, that would be a pretty good idea.” The snake replied, the tone of it’s voice rather teasing.

“Now... what to I call a female snake...”

The snake huffed and, if it had arms, it would have probably crossed them in annoyance. “My voissse may be a little high-pitched, but that doesssn’t mean I’m a girl.” He pouted a bit.

“Umm... ok... a boy snake then... How about Charm?”

“Oh, and you’ll call your owl ‘Transssfiguration’, I bet?” He taunted.

“Oh shush, I’m trying to find something here... hmm...”

“I guessed that much,” He interrupted. “unless you often and randomly state the name of one of your classes...”

Annoyed, Harry glared at the snake, who smirked a bit. “Shut up if you don’t want to be called Fluffy.”

The snake's eyes shot wide and he kept silent as Harry picked a name for him, finally settling on Nemesis, thinking it sounded cool. The snake agreed, too, which was a relief.

The rest of the summer went very well for Harry. Nemesis was a bit odd at times and rather infuriating when he wanted, but he was fun to talk to. Blaise and him looked up at their books, the girl rather reluctantly, the boy excitedly.

"Oh great, Harry Potter, the nerd." She teased.

"Hilarious, Blaise." He replied flatly. "I just wanna look up if there's some way I can turn Dudley into a pig."

"Don't need magic for that, his parents did that very nicely."

And a second later, both were laughing, imagining more animals to transform Harry's cousin into. At the end, when they were dealing with the possible risk he had of suddenly turning into an hippopotamus, Mrs Zabini decided to come in... and add her own (and very creative) ideas.

Let's all hope Dudley likes pink gorillas with throbbing electric blue spots on their bodies.

Chapter 2: *And the hat said...*

“NOOOOOOO!!! IT CAN'T... ALREADY BE...”

That morning, in number five, Privet drive, a shrill, high-pitched scream of terror and agony woke the household up. Number four woke up soon after, when Dudley fell from his bed as an after-effect from the scream, shaking the foundations of the house.

“Yes, it already is...” Harry mumbled sleepily from his bed, then sat up, beaming, as he realized what he had said. “IT ALREADY IS!”

You wonder what's already is? The calendar can answer you.

The day was September first. The day they would leave to Hogwarts. The day Harry Potter had been waiting impatiently. The day that meant the same thing, in Blaise Zabini's mind, as the end of the world.

While Harry excitedly burst down the stairs, beaming widely as he stumbled in the kitchen, Blaise had a look similar to someone walking down the death row for the third time after the electric chair malfunctioned twice.

“Good morning!” came Harry's cheerful welcome in a voice so sweet listening to it gave tooth decay as he literally floated down on his chair.

“Hey.” Came Blaise's flat voice as she dragged her feet into the room in a way similar to someone who had just took a jogging trip non-stop around the world, almost knocking her chair over when she tumbled down on it, her head falling on her arms.

For the two adults in the house, it was a most amusing sight. Harry was evidently very eager to go to Hogwarts. Then again, he was very eager with anything to do with magic, so his eagerness would probably be lost after a week of intense immersion in it. As for Blaise, she looked like it was a condemnation to eternal doom and eyed her Hogwarts letter like a one-way ticket to hell. With free dibs on the lava

baths. The extra-hot ones, not the cheap public ones. Honestly, Satan should think better than... umm... I digress.

"C'mon, Blaise! It's not THAT bad! Sure, we're going to school... but this is *Hogwarts* we're talking about." Harry tried to reason.

"So? It's still a school, which means teachers, work, work, more work and..." She shuddered "...Homework..."

"There's nothing wrong with a little work..."

She glared at him, shutting him up very effectively, then continued on her tirade. "And I bet the teachers are all horrible... I bet they'll all give us mountains of homework... and their detentions are gonna be terrible and painful..."

Mrs Zabini burst out laughing at that, stopping her daughter. "Horrible? Ok, so Professor McGonagall is a *bit* strict, but apart from her, all the others are as calm as Puffskeins. Flitwick, Hagrid, Professor Dumbledore... as for Quirell, I certainly doubt you'll find him scary. Chances are, he'll find *you* scary."

Everyone chuckled, Mr Zabini having heard of Professor Quirrel through Harry's excited speech on his return from Diagon Alley.

After breakfast, they packed their things, Harry hiding Nemesis in his trunk, much to the snake's annoyance, which he voiced very loudly as Harry tried to stuff him among the disused socks. Then, Mrs Zabini drove them out to King's cross. Harry noticed the Dursleys were all looking out the window and couldn't help but wave out and smirk.

"Curse you next summer!" He shouted.

The curtains of the window almost ripped when a purple uncle Vernon closed them, much to the Zabini's and Harry's hilarity.

"You *do* know that you won't be able to cast spells during the summer, right?"

Harry nodded and smirked impishly. "I know, but they don't."

The station was unusually crowded that day. Muggles were everywhere, many of them in business suits while the wizards stuck

out like a sore thumb. Evidently, they had no idea what muggles wore at all, as proved by a man who passed by them, dressed in a skiing suit top and golfing pants, or that woman who was wearing a dressing jacket and very small skirt, making her look like a hooker. She appeared puzzled at the looks she was receiving and Harry could barely stop himself from bursting out laughing. He expected to see one of them dressed in a mascot costume anytime now.

Mrs Zabini guided them through the hilarious spectacle, toward the barrier between platform 9 and 10.

“Blaise, you go first. Just run right at the barrier, don’t be afraid. Make sure the muggles don’t see you though.”

The girl nodded and gripped her trolley’s handle in both hands, running straight at the brick wall. Just as she was about to hit it, a muggle businessman passed in front of them, looking at his watch like he was late, and the next thing Harry knew, Blaise wasn’t there anymore.

“Your turn now.” Mrs Zabini said with a warm smile that wanted to be comforting, but ended up chilling Harry’s bones. What if the barrier didn’t let him through? What if he hit it and look like an idiot? What if he really *wasn’t* a wizard...

...

He then felt really stupid for even thinking such a thing. Gathering all his courage, he faced the ominous enemy that stared back at him through it’s stony ey--...umm... bricks, standing up against him. Harry was sure he heard it chuckle, though it could very well have been his imagination.

He aimed at the barrier like a marksman archer going for the kill; it would be really stupid of him to miss the barrier now, would it? One last look around him to check if there was any muggle watching and, seeing as Mrs Zabini was the only one looking at him, he charged forward, his feet thundering at the stones, the trolley pulling him forward in it’s momentum like a jousting knight’s stallion. He knew he wouldn’t be able to stop and closed his eyes, preparing for the impact.

There was an impact, but not against the wall. Unless the wall had the ability to speak obscenities and calling whoever hit it a “bloody murdering maniac”.

Harry opened his eyes and found he had knocked over a platinum-haired boy. A familiar platinum-haired boy, accompanied by a tall slightly-darker-haired man who looked at him with an air of surprise and disgust.

Draco Malfoy looked up and smirked at Harry. “Oh, it’s you...” He said simply, rubbing at his head. “Well, just ‘cause I know you, I’ll forgive you for that.”

Harry chuckled and helped Draco up as Blaise walked closer to them.

“Harry, c’mon! Let’s get the best seats!” She shouted.

“Coming Blaise!” He shouted back, grabbing his trolley and settling Hedwig’s cage, in which the owl was looking a bit more than disgruntled at him.

He gave a quick nod at the blonde boy and sped toward the train. Behind him, Draco’s father bent down to whisper something at the boy’s ear, something that made the boy gasp in surprise. The words “Harry Potter” were readable on his lips.

Harry and Blaise easily found a compartment. They were very early and, thus, had many places to choose from. They picked one near the middle, hung their things on the supports over them, and settled down on the comfy seats.

“Can’t wait to be there!!” Harry let out, grinning from ear to ear.

Blaise deadpanned and sighed dramatically, her head dropping on her arms which were crossed on the table. “nut mfff..” she mumbled.

Harry burst out laughing at her face just as the door slid open and Draco, alone, walked in.

“So, you didn’t tell me you were Harry Potter.” He said directly and as bluntly as a mace.

“Does it matter?” Harry asked with a shrug. Blaise grinned a bit.

“Doe...” Draco looked a bit surprised, then smiled. “Draco Malfoy, but you already knew that.”

“Harry Potter, but apparently you found out.” Harry replied with a smile. The other boy chuckled. “And this is Blaise Zabini...” He motioned to the girl, who waved and grinned widely in her usual constantly-hyper way.

“Zabini, eh?” Draco said, frowning a bit.

“Yes, Zabini. Got a problem with my family name?” Blaise asked, practically glaring at him.

Draco shrugged. “No, not really. Not your family name.”

Harry guessed that there was something he didn’t know about, but figured it wasn’t the time to ask. Instead, he changed the subject.

“So, Draco, what house do you think you’ll be in?”

“None of the other houses are good enough but Slytherin. You?”

Harry shrugged. “Maybe Slytherin too, maybe anything else... I think whoever’s sending us in our houses’ gonna have a hard time on me.”

Blaise shrugged. “Well, from what I’ve heard, your dad was a Gryffindor, you look bookish enough to be a Ravenclaw, but you look more like a Slytherin to me.”

“It’d be a shame is Harry Potter was ANYTHING *but* a Slytherin.” Draco commented.

Harry gave him a look, then shrugged. “Guess we’ll see when we get there... It’d be fun if we’re all in Slytherin though.”

Blaise grinned and nodded. “Sure would!”

The train whistled loudly, announcing it’s immediate departure. Harry looked out the window and waved at Mrs Zabini, finally spotting someone dressed in a mascot costume, of Barney, no less.

The train started picking up speed and Harry closed the window, grinning.

“Boy, you sure look happy to be going...” Draco said, giving him an odd look.

Harry shrugged. “Well, let’s see. I’m going to a school to study *magic*, I’ll be *far* from the Dursleys and, for once, Dudley’s not coming to make my life hell. So, yes, I’m happy to be going.”

“I almost wish he was going...” Blaise mused. “Then we’d have someone to practice our hexes on...”

Harry gave her an odd look, but his eyes were laughing. “Wouldn’t the target be a bit too big... I mean, it would be harder to aim on a small whale than him...” Blaise burst out laughing and Draco smirked, although he looked a bit puzzled.

Harry and Blaise continued to make fun of Dudley for another hour, assisted by Draco who joined in after a while, and by the time the food cart arrived, they still hadn’t gone through all his faults.

“You want anything?” The witch pushing the food cart asked.

Draco grinned and took out a large pouch, taking out a dozen Gallions.

“A bit of everything please.”

“A bag of every flavor beans for me!” Blaise chimed, holding out a coin.

Harry looked at the pouch in surprise. Was everyone in the wizarding world wealthy? Then, he remembered Blaise’s family, who lived rather normally. Maybe the coins didn’t have much value? He decided to ask Blaise later, not wanting to look stupid.

He looked in awe at the mountain of candy Draco had bought. He randomly picked something, a bag of what looked like multicolored beans.

“Careful around those, Harry...” Blaise began, her hand in a similar bag. “They really *are* of every flavor. If you’re lucky, you can end up with chocolate, blueberry or strawberry, but there’s also trash, goblin blood... mom says she got wasabi one day.”

“Wasabi? What’s that?” Draco asked.

“A very, very hot muggle Japanese spice... she almost drank the Mediterranean sea after just that one. Not that salt water would have helped any.” After a quick chuckle, she popped a golden-colored bean in her mouth and grinned. “Caramel! Mmm...!”

Harry picked the first one he saw, an odd, grey bean. With hesitation, he popped it in his mouth, then his face twisted and he spit it out. “Trash!!” He gasped, opening the window and throwing it out under the other two teens’ laughs. Deciding to go for something safer, he made another random choice from the mountain, this time taking an hexagonal package that opened from the top. What was inside made him gasp in surprise, then even more as it jumped out of the box.

“A frog?!”

Draco quickly caught it and gave a look at Harry. “Not real frogs, they’re made out of chocolate.”

Relieved, Harry picked it out of Draco’s hand and ate it, then looked down in the package.

“Hey, there’s some kind of card there...”

Blaise grinned, her hand stuck in her “Bertie Blott’s every flavor beans” bag. “That’s the best part of chocolate frogs... minus the frog, ‘course. In each package, there’s a card of a famous witch or wizard. Which one do you have?”

Harry looked and gasped. “Albus Dumbledore... cool!”

Blaise shrugged. “Already have 2 of those... If you get a Morgan though, I can exchange for one of my Ptolemys.” (A/N: Lol, little joke here, re-read the book at that part)

Harry wasn’t quite listening, his attention completely on the words on the card.

Albus Dumbledore, current Headmaster of Hogwarts, school of witchcraft and wizardry.

Widely considered to be the greatest wizard of the current age, Dumbledore is the headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Famous for defeating the dark wizard Grindelwald in 1945, for discovering the twelve uses of dragon's blood, and for his work on alchemy with his friend Nicolas Flamel.

"whoa... he sounds impressive..." Harry mumbled, turning to card around to see the picture. To his annoyance, it was gone. In his short time at the Zabinis' house, he had seen normal wizard pictures and how they moved. Before his eyes, Dumbledore walked back, his old, sage and blue eyes twinkling merrily at him.

"Sounds boring to me." Drawled Draco.

Soon, dozens of chocolate frog packages were open and cards were laid down in front of them. Blaise was happily looking at the "Morgan" Harry had given her, Draco was chuckling while a blushing Harry was trying to take the "Harry Potter" card from his hand, in which he was just a baby, cooing and ginning toothlessly at whoever looked.

And it's at that scene that a bushy-haired girl opened the door, looking around, while a slightly round-faced boy was looking in the compartment just in front, where two red-haired and a black-skinned boys were looking at a rather large box out of which an unnaturally large furry spider leg was sticking out, it's owner apparently trying to get out of the box.

"Excuse me," she asked, looking around. She was already dressed in her robes. "but did any of you see a toad around here?"

"Nope, we –"give that back!"– not a chance, Harry... didn't see anything."

The girl pouted a bit. Harry grinned and pounced, grabbing the card but ending up pushing both him and Draco to the ground, the card slipping out of both their hands and at Hermione's feet.

"Hey, gerroff!" Draco protested, pushing Harry off him and getting up, giving a quick glare at the other boy.

Harry got up, dusted himself and turned to the girl, who was looking at the picture, then back at him, her eyes wide.

“You’re Harry Potter?”

Harry groaned and slapped his forehead. He hated those words already. “Last time I checked.” He replied wearily.

“That’s so awesome! I’m Hermione Granger and I know everything about you, I read some additional books for my general knowledge and I can tell you they talk about you in *Modern Magical History*, *The Rise and Fall of the Dark Arts* and in *Great Wizarding Events of the Twentieth Century*.”

Harry gave her a surprised look. He knew he was famous, but didn’t know he was in the history books.

“You didn’t know? If it had happened to me, I would have read everything that talked about it.” She said. Harry mentally snorted. Like he wanted to be reminded how his parents had died. “Do you know in what house you’ll be?” Before Draco could reply the almighty “S” word, she continued “I hope I’ll be in Gryffindor, it looks like the best house... I read Dumbledore passed his studies there, but Ravenclaw doesn’t bad either. Oh, I have to go, Neville’s toad won’t find itself.” She turned around, and shot one final look at them. “You’d better put on your robes, we’ll be there soon.”

And she closed the door, after not letting any of the three say one word in her extremely fast babble. The three looked at each other in still silence for a while.

“Muggle-borns...” Draco muttered in an exasperated sigh.

Harry shrugged. “I understand her perfectly... ‘xcept for the constant reading part.”

Blaise gave him a wry look. “Really? Who was it again that looked at his books like they were telling you the 101 ways of manipulating people into doing what you want?”

Harry shot her a dark look while Draco suddenly looked thoughtful. “Hmm... they really *should* make a book like that, it would be *quite* useful...” he mused.

“Who do you wanna try it on?” Harry asked, wondering if Draco even *had* an enemy to manipulate.

“That’s for me to know and for you to find out, Potter.” The blonde boy challenged.

“Let’s put our robes on...” Blaise said, getting up and pulling out her own black robe, which she pulled down over her clothes, imitated by the two others.

The door opened again and two large boys walked in, looking at Draco.

“The train’s about to stop and—” The largest of the two began.

“I know that.” He snapped, turning to Harry. “This is Crabbe, this is Goyle.” He pointed at the two gorillas.

Harry gave him a smirk. “What, you’d need a book to manipulate them?”

Draco shook his head and whispered to Harry “Their skulls are about as thick as a pair of dragon hide-reinforced budgers, and a caterpillar would sleepwalk faster than they can think. No, I do *not* need a book to manipulate those two.”

Harry gave another look at the two, who were looking through the door, apparently unsure of what to do now that their message was delivered. Yup, Harry mused, no one would need a book to manipulate those two.

The train screeched to a halt at the station. Outside, the sky was already dark and the small village’s windows were all lit in a light that varied strength and color. One of them had a flashing green light that made Harry wonder how the person inside could stand it. Draco seemed to know what to do and, after leaving his things in the train, walked straight out. The other two, puzzled, shrugged and followed him.

As soon as they were out, the first thing Harry noticed was that he was among the smallest. Everyone around them were easily two or

three heads taller than Crabbe and Goyle. They all heard, however, the bellowing voice that shouted loudly “Firs’ years! Firs’ years, c’m over here!”

They followed the voice directly to Hagrid’s enormous booted feet. The man was wearing the same large cloak filled with pockets he had been wearing the first time Harry had seen him, along with a crimson coat that could easily have covered the four boys and the girl at the same time. He grinned at them as they arrived, waving with the only trashcan-lid-sized hand that wasn’t occupied by holding a large lamp.

“Hey there Harry!” He said, grinning at the boy. He replied with a grin and nodded.

After making sure there were no more first years left, Hagrid guided them away from the large group of students going up the hill to Hogwarts in what seemed to be horseless carriages. They stopped at the edge of the gigantic lake that, because of the night sky, looked as black as ink. There were barely any ripples on it, or any waves.

“Alrigh’!” Hagrid bellowed, affectively breaking both the lake’s calmness and Harry’s hearing. “Get ‘n the boats, ev’body! Four per boat!”

Harry sat down in one and was followed by Draco, who sat just beside him, and the two gorillas on the back bench. He spotted Blaise sitting in the same boat as a bushy-haired girl who was talking excitedly and absolutely identical Indian girls, in a boat some distance at their right.

He let out a sigh as the boat left the shore, heading forward on the water, leaving a very small wave on the flat and uniform surface of the lake.

Slowly, the boats glided across the lake, which he noticed was formed a bit like an L. At their left stood a tall cliff that was hiding--

There was a flurry of “OOH!”s and “AAH!”s as the boats slowly turned around the cliff, revealing a marvelous sight. There, standing proudly on top of tall cliffs, facing the elements without flinching, was the largest castle Harry had ever seen, in life or in picture. Considering the only other castle he had seen was the drawn Disney castle from

Dudley's comics, it wasn't saying much, but the building was truly magnificent. The tallest towers were so high he couldn't see them in the night sky, its uncountable windows flickered brightly in a flaming glow that reflected on the black lake. The walls were barely visible, making it look like a spot of the sky where the stars were yellow. But they knew what it was.

Hogwarts.

"Heads down!" Hagrid shouted as the boats approached a cave. The students obeyed quickly as they entered it, passing through a wall of wet and floppy vines. Harry's boat shook just after Draco and he had passed through. The blonde boy looked behind and burst out laughing. Crabbe hadn't been fast enough and a vine was hanging from the spot of hair on his head.

They stopped near a set of large oak doors. Hagrid turned to them. "Ev'body's here? Good!" He said, his voice even louder in the echoing environment of the cave. He turned around, facing the doors, and smashed his fist against the wood three times, a movement commonly known as 'knocking the door', although the original version didn't include enough strength in the contact to shake the foundations of the castle. Hagrid's version was more like a 'knocking *off* the door'.

The doors opened in a loud cracking noise, revealing a very strict-looking old woman, wearing half-moon glasses and white hair tightly tied in a bun behind her head came, looking at them and nodding. Harry's first thoughts about her was that she wasn't one to be played around with.

"This yer's firsties, ma'am McGonagall." Hagrid said, pointing out the obvious.

The old woman nodded and, after dismissing Hagrid, led them through the stone hallways, moving staircases, darkly lit dungeons and the entrance hall, which was so huge the Dursley's home could have been built there and so high they couldn't see the roof, to a smaller room reserved for first years. Harry could hear hundreds of voices coming through the door at their right. The other students probably were already there. The room was so small the students were tightly packed

Professor McGonagall turned to them, her eyes scanning the room. They paused a moment on him, before continuing.

“Welcome to Hogwarts,” she began. “the opening feast will soon begin but before you can take your place at the great hall, you must first be sorted in one of the houses. This sorting is a very important ceremony. You must know that during your stay at this school, your house will be like a second family for you. You will take the same classes, sleep in the same dormitory and pass your free time in the same common room. There are four houses. Their names are Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Slytherin. Each house has their own history, it’s own pride and every single one of them has created, through the ages, witches and wizards of the highest level. During your years at Hogwarts, every time you have good results, your house gains house points. However, every time you will break a rule, your house will lose points. At the end of the year, the house that received the highest number of points will win the house cup, which is a very great honor. I hope that each and every one of you will take it deeply to your hearts to serve your house, whichever it is. The sorting ceremony will begin in a few minutes in front of every student of this school. I suggest you use the time you have left to make sure you’re presentable.”

Her piercing eyes went to the round-faced boy, who’s cape was half-laying on his shoulder, and to a red-haired boy who had a rather large spot of dirt on his nose. Draco grinned in a self-satisfied way, Crabbe and Goyle re-adjusted their neckties – they made them look like monkeys in suit, much like Vernon when he was going to work – while Blaise passed a nervous hand in her hair, smoothing it as much as she could. Harry tried to bring down his stubborn hair.

“I will be back when everything will be ready,” Professor McGonagall continued. “Wait for me quietly.”

And she left .Harry felt quite nervous.

“How do they sort us?” He asked Draco.

The blonde boy shrugged. “There’s some kind of mystery around it. It’s never written in any book, no one will speak about that... not even

my dad did. He said it was nothing to be afraid of, but to him, an army of rampaging dragon isn't something to be afraid of either."

Blaise gave a look at Draco. "Your dad's a nutcase."

Draco frowned. "My dad is very wealthy and powerful, and is practically second-in-command in the ministry. I'd hardly call *that* a nutcase."

Blaise shrugged and grinned. "Well they put Fudge up there." she muttered. Having heard a lot of his mistakes from Mrs Zabini's rants, Harry chuckled while Draco continued to praise his father.

Suddenly, screams erupted from behind Harry. He whirled around and gasped in surprise. About twenty ghosts had just appeared by going through the far wall. They looked different from the ghost at the restaurant, yet had the same grey tone and odd glowing aura around them. One of them, who looked like a fat friar, said in a loud and calm voice

"Forgive and forget. We should give him a second chance."

"Brother, didn't we already give Peeves every chance he deserved?" asked another ghost, wearing a tunic with a ruff around his neck. "He is giving us a horrible reputation while he, himself, is not really a ghost. Hmm? Hey, what are they doing here?" He turned to the first years.

"They're probably the new students." The fat friar said, smiling. "You're waiting for the sorting ceremony, aren't you?"

Few students nodded their heads silently.

"Well, I hope I'll see you in Hufflepuff. It was my house back when I was here... and alive."

"Everyone, it is time!" A sharp voice made them all jump. McGonagall was back. "The sorting ceremony will now begin. Line up and follow me."

The doors opened and they entered the room. Harry had read about it in his history book, but the words of the book paled in comparison with the real thing... probably like most words. It was the biggest

room Harry had ever seen. Four parallel tables covered most of it and hundreds of teenagers to young adults were sitting there. The roof was enchanted to look like the sky, but it looked so good Harry was surprised there was a roof.

He looked back in front of him and saw McGonagall had brought forward a three-legged stool on which an old, dirty, decrepit and patched up pointy wizard hat was laying.

‘What’s the connection between a sorting and a hat?’ Harry asked himself, frowning. ‘Maybe we have to pull a rabbit out of it and they see how good we are?’

The other students around him were looking just as puzzled as he was. For a long moment, there was nothing but silence covering the hall, but then a rip at the brim of the hat opened and it began to sign:

Oh you may not think I am pretty,
But don't judge on what you see,
I'll eat myself if you can find
A smarter hat than me.
You can keep your bowlers black,
Your top hats sleek and tall,
For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat
And I can cap them all.
There's nothing hidden in your head
The Sorting Hat can't see,
So try me on and I will tell you
Where you ought to be.
You might belong in Gryffindor,
Where dwell the brave at heart,
Their daring, nerve, and chivalry
Set Gryffindors apart;
You might belong in Hufflepuff,
Where they are just and loyal,
Those patient Hufflepuffs are true
And unafraid of toil;
Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,
If you've a ready mind,

*Where those of wit and learning,
 Will always find their kind;
 Or perhaps in Slytherin
 You'll make your real friends,
 Those cunning folks use any means
 To achieve their ends.
 So put me on! Don't be afraid!
 And don't get in a flap!
 You're in safe hands (though I have none)
 For I'm a Thinking Cap!*

As soon as the song ended, the great hall covered in applause. The hat bowed to the four tables and stilled.

Harry let out a relieved sigh. They only had to put the hat on. Good. He heard the red-head boy mutter something about killing his brothers. 'Probably fed him some frightening story...' Harry mused.

McGonagall took a step forward and unrolled a list. "When I say your name, you will walk up here, put on the hat and wait until it sorts you, then you will go to your assigned house. Let's begin... Abbot Hannah!"

A blonde-haired girl muttered something about hating her name as she walked up to the hat and put it on, the hat so large it fell over her eyes.

"HUFFLEPUFF!" The hat shouted after a short moment of silence.

The girl walked straight to the Hufflepuff table, after putting off the hat, grinning from ear to ear.

The sorting continued. Boot, Terry became the first Ravenclaw, Brown Lavender got that honor for Gryffindor and Bulstrode, Millicent was sent in Slytherin. It didn't look much different from the other houses... except maybe for the fact that some of them looked quite burly and many others had an aristocratic look on their faces.

Crabbe and Goyle were sent in Slytherin – after a long moment of hesitation for some reason.

"Granger, Hermione!" "GRYFFINDOR!"

The red-haired boy groaned and Harry couldn't help but snicker. He'd be groaning to if he had that girl in his house. 'That's assuming he wants to be in Gryffindor...'

"Malfoy, Draco!"

Draco took a self-assured look and walked up to the hat in a superior way. He picked the hat up, sat down and, before it even touched his head, the hat sorted him "SLYTHERIN!". Once again, Harry snickered.

The letters passed. Finally, they were on "P". Patil, Pavarti was sent in Gryffindor, Patil, Padma in Ravenclaw and Parkinson, Pansy in Slytherin. Then, finally, and, to Harry, unfortunately, it was "Potter, Harry!"'s turn.

(Little question from the books here: How come all of the others are in the form "Family name, first name" while she just says "Harry Potter"?)

Whispers erupted across the great hall as Harry left the line. .

"Did she say Harry Potter?" "THE Harry Potter?"

He felt himself blush and hurried to the hat, not looking at the following gazes and the stretched necks. He sat down on the stool and put on the hat quickly to hide the crowd. To his surprise, he heard a small voice mumble in his ear.

"Hmm... difficult. Very difficult. Smart, yes... definitely loyal... loads of courage as well... But where will you go? You'd be bored in Hufflepuff, definitely... and Ravenclaw isn't quite for you. That leaves Gryffindor... hmm, but you have quite a thirst to prove yourself as well, to prove that your name isn't just a famous pair of words... that fits for Slytherin, too. Unusual case you are, my boy."

"Well, you're the sorting hat, you decide. Which is better?"

"You're the one I'm sending off, don't you care? How do you fancy being in Gryffindor? They usually end up aurors or people fighting against the dark arts..."

Harry started trying to imagine himself fighting a group of dark-cloaked figures, single-handedly defeating them, beating them into

submission, then facing their leader --which, for some reason, looked oddly like a snake with red eyes—and defeating him easily. He was the most powerful. He was fearsome. He was...

“Hmm... considering everything you just thought and every side of you, I’d say SLYTHERIN!”

Harry felt a bit surprised, then slapped himself. He had imagined himself the most powerful, a sign of ambition. With a sigh, he put it off, walking toward the Slytherin table, before noticing the still silence in the great hall. He turned to the teachers and noted that McGonagall’s eyes were wide and Dumbledore’s eyes were looking rather gravely at him. He frowned. ‘Probably wanted me to be in Gryffindor like him.’ he mused, then continued his walk toward the Slytherin table, sitting down as cheers flooded the green and silver table.

Draco smirked. “Welcome to Hogwarts, Harry.”

Harry smiled back, albeit a bit nervously. The silence was only broken a minute later when, after being reminded by Dumbledore, McGonagall continued.

The red-head was identified as Weasley, Ron as he was sent in Gryffindor, while Zabini, Blaise ended the sorting by sitting just beside Harry.

The black-haired boy noticed that everyone, especially McGonagall and the Gryffindor house, were stealing glances at him every now and then, their eyes filled either with fear or pity. Frowning a bit, he looked at the high table and crossed eyes with a greasy-haired man who was half-heartedly talking to Quirrell.

He suddenly flinched as he felt his scar burning. Barely stifflly a gasp and slapping his hand to his forehead, he turned his eyes away, turning to Blaise who had apparently noticed.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m ok... its nothing.” He lied quickly. “Who’s that, talking to Quirrell there?” He pointed at the greasy-haired man.

"That's Severus Snape. The potion teacher and our head of house." Draco replied. "I can't wait to see how he teaches, most of us say he's great. Though he's a bit cold and not to be crossed, and when he decides to scold you'd wish he took out the whip."

Harry nodded, but wasn't quite relieved. Looking at the cold glare of the teacher, he had the distinct impression the man didn't like him much.

"Welcome to a new year at Hogwarts! Before we begin our banquet, I would like to say a few words. And here they are: Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak! Thank you."

The hall laughed as the food covered the tables. Harry felt his stomach start aching as he realized how hungry he was. Practically drooling, he filled up his plate with everything he could reach under the disbelieving look of Blaise.

"Geez, stop, you make us look like we starved you!" she protested with a smile.

Harry found out he had covered every inch of his plate and couldn't help but blush sheepishly, starting to eat.

When his plate was clean, which wasn't done until half an hour – and an aching stomach, but not for the same reason – later, he started looking around for familiar faces, not expecting any. Nope, no one he knew was there, although he did notice He, Crabbe, Goyle and Draco seemed to be the only boys in Slytherin for their year. Blaise had started talking with a pug-faced girl whom she called Pansy and, beside that girl was another one, who looked like a witch's answer to Dudley. Suddenly, through the empty chair at his left came a large ghost with silvery blood covering him. His cold and cruel eyes glared at Harry, who couldn't help but flinch. If he had seen a scarier gaze one day, he certainly didn't remember it now.

"Erm... hello..." Harry muttered, trying to turn away from the gaze.

The ghost grunted an inaudible reply, turned to the other first years and grinned darkly, revealing a missing teeth.

“You lot better not cause trouble. ‘cause if you do, then you’ll wish you had stayed home.”

And he slipped back down through the chair, leaving the first years to be puzzled.

“Was he being serious?” Harry asked Draco.

The blonde boy nodded shakily. “I heard he sticks Peeves the poltergeist at Slytherins who behave badly. Trust me, you *don’t* want that.”

Harry nodded, absorbing the information.

At the high table, Dumbledore got up and clapped his hands, making the food vanish instantly. His clear and glittering blue eyes looked around the room and Harry noticed, with a sense of happiness, that the old man accorded as much attention to him as to everyone else – a mere glance. Then again, the letter said he was famous, so he probably knew what it was to be gazed at every time he was out in public – possibly in the muggle world as well. At least Harry was lucky enough to look normal in *that* world.

“Now that we have all fed our hunger and drenched our thirst, I have a few messages to give about the rules of the school. First years are required to note that the forest surrounding the school is forbidden to every student, with no exceptions, hence it’s name. Some of our older students should also try to remember it.”

Harry noticed him look at someone in the Gryffindor table, a pair of twins that grinned mischievously.

“Mr Filch, the caretaker, as also asked me to remind you that there is no magic allowed in the halls. The Quidditch teams’ tryouts will happen two weeks into the first term. Those who wish to be part of their house’s team will have to speak to madam Hooch. Finally, for this year only, the third floor corridor in the right wing is strictly forbidden unless you want a die a quick and extremely painful death.”

Harry looked around. No one was laughing, except a few first year Hufflepuffs, who quickly stopped. Apparently, it was serious. Deadly serious, pardon the pun.

"I think that's all..." The old man mused, before his eyes twinkled and he grinned. "Ah yes! I almost forgot!"

The smiles on the teachers' faces froze. Harry wondered what was horrible enough to cause that.

"Before we go to sleep, we sing the school's song! Everyone pick a tune and sing to it!"

'Oh' Harry thought as his wondering was answered. Yup, that certainly could.

A quick wave of his wand caused golden ribbons to appear in the air, on which the words appeared.

<i>Hogwarts,</i>	<i>Hogwarts,</i>	<i>Hoggy</i>	<i>Warty</i>	<i>Hogwarts,</i>			
<i>Teach</i>	<i>us</i>	<i>something,</i>		<i>please,</i>			
<i>Whether</i>	<i>we</i>	<i>be</i>	<i>old</i>	<i>and</i>	<i>bald</i>		
<i>Or</i>	<i>young</i>	<i>with</i>	<i>scabby</i>		<i>knees,</i>		
<i>Our</i>	<i>heads</i>	<i>could</i>	<i>do</i>	<i>with</i>	<i>filling</i>		
<i>With</i>	<i>some</i>		<i>interesting</i>		<i>stuff,</i>		
<i>For</i>	<i>now</i>	<i>they're</i>	<i>bare</i>	<i>and</i>	<i>full</i>	<i>of</i>	<i>air,</i>
<i>Dead</i>	<i>flies</i>	<i>and</i>	<i>bits</i>		<i>of</i>		<i>fluff,</i>
<i>So</i>	<i>teach</i>	<i>us</i>	<i>things</i>	<i>worth</i>			<i>knowing,</i>
<i>Bring</i>	<i>back</i>	<i>what</i>	<i>we've</i>				<i>forgot,</i>
<i>Just</i>	<i>do</i>	<i>your</i>	<i>best,</i>	<i>we'll</i>	<i>do</i>	<i>the</i>	<i>rest,</i>
<i>And learn until our brains all rot.</i>							

Harry decided to sing it to a quick rap, so he wouldn't embarrass himself too much. Draco kept silent, smirking and arms crossed, while Blaise got up on her chair and began loudly shouting the words in a tango. However, the last ones to finish were the red-haired twins he had seen earlier, simply because they had sung it to a funeral song – "Should have thought of that too!" protested Blaise.

The feast ended after that and the prefects guided the students to their common rooms. A prefect Draco called "Flint" guided them out of the great hall, passing dangerously close to the Gryffindor house. Harry noticed another red-head, this time with a spot of dirt on his nose, glaring at him, and the Hermione girl shooting him a pitying look. He almost growled. Did everyone think he was to be in Gryffindor?

Flint guided them down in the dungeons, through a long path involving secret passages, a moving portrait, a false door with a false wall just beside and, finally, arriving in front of a completely naked wall.

“Machiavelli!” Flint said, and a hidden door opened, a door so well hidden in the stone wall you HAD to know where it was to find it.

“Machiavelli?” Blaise asked to Draco. “Wasn’t that a Muggle?”

Draco shook his head. “Naa. He was a wizard, but he claimed that the best way to gain power is by using the gullible muggles. He wrote some books about controlling masses, they’re pretty useful. Dad has all 15 of ‘em.”

“Including ‘the prince’?” Blaise asked.

Draco shrugged. “He bought the wizarding version. The muggle version is too cut and censored. Don’t want the muggles to know about the imperio curse, y’know...” He replied with an evil smirk as they entered in the common room.

Flint showed them their dormitories and, exhausted, the students (Little buggers) obeyed his command/order/threat to “Scram to sleep before I get mad”.

Chapter 3: *Teachers and thieves*

“Remember, you stay hidden under the covers, Nemesis.” Harry whispered to his snake, who was glaring angrily at him from under the dark green bed sheet.

“Why can’t you just tell ‘em all I’m here?” He asked, a tone of annoyance obvious in his voice.

“I trust Draco, but Crabbe and Goyle might accidentally slip I have you. And I’m not allowed to have a snake here.”

“Geez, trust dummy and dumber to wreck everything. And why d’ya trust he-who’s-hair-makes-the-brightest-lighthouses-jealous?” Sardonically asked the snake, giving a look at Draco’s bed, around which the green curtains were tightly drawn. “I mean, he just screams ‘bad boy’ to me...”

“Hush!” Harry hissed, looking around the dormitory. Fortunately, Crabbe and Goyle’s loud snoring blocked the noise of their whispered conversation. After a silent sigh of relief, he turned back to his loudmouthed pet. “I just do. He’ll keep it quiet as long as it’s in his advantage. But those two are probably too stupid to figure out where their advantage is.”

“Finey, finey... Oh and, Harry?”

“What?”

“Ya better wake Dumb, Dumber and Shiny up, you’re nearly late.”

Harry glanced at the clock, realizing he only had 10 minutes before his first class. While Draco was easy to wake, it took them a “Pluvius” charm to wake the two roaring logs up -- “At least it saves them time for a shower.” Draco mused with a smirk.

In the middle of breakfast, a flurry of owls flew overhead, distributing mail, packages or just coming for a visit. Hedwig flew down and, after nibbling affectionately on Harry's ear, accepted the bits of beacon her master gave her.

"Lucifer!" Draco said with a smile as a large great horned owl landed on his shoulder, dropping a bag of sweets on the table along the way. Harry learned it was from his mother, who made it a morning ritual of sending sweets every day.

Harry quickly realized that the practice of magic was much harder than just waving his wand around and saying weird words. That they only did in Charms, which was taught by Professor Flitwick, a very small and a bit clumsy teacher. That same teacher had squeaked and fell down the pile of books—that he used to look more impressive, not that it worked—while making the role call, after reading Harry's name.

The Herbology class was held in the greenhouses outside of school and involved, as the name indicated, learning about magical plants. Harry quickly learned not to get too close from some of them, especially those with thorns and teeth. Goyle, however, seemed to forget that rule until he found himself hanging upside-down from the ceiling with a vine tied around his leg, much to everyone's amusement.

Defense against the dark arts was a class that brought mixed feelings among the Slytherins. Some of them looked unhappy it was taught, for some reason, while the many others had heard about it and didn't look happier. Harry understood quickly why: Quirrell's teaching turned it into a joke. His class smelled strongly of garlic, rumored to have been put there after the professor had had a nasty meeting with a vampire in the dark forest. Also, the teacher's purple turban emitted the same stench, and the story of how he had got it didn't fit: apparently he had fought off a Zombie and saved an African chieftain, who offered the turban as thanks, but Quirrell wasn't able to tell them how he had defeated the zombie, nor where it was in Africa.

Harry had thought right when he had first seen McGonagall. She was not one to be crossed. Her only redeeming quality was that she was fair, in the fact that she gave the same impossibly huge amount of homework to the Slytherins as to the other houses. She talked to

them quite directly in the first class, claiming that any fooling around in her class was to be severely punished. Harry, for one, took the warning seriously.

..however, Harry noted she was rather colder on him than the others.

More detestable than McGonagall was Peeves, the poltergeist. Thankfully, he was rather soft on Slytherins, since their ghost was the bloody baron, the only one who was said to have ever been able to control him. However, it didn't stop him from attacking them every now and then.

And even worst than him were the infernal duo: Filch and Mrs Norris. Why that darn cat was called "mrs" was a schoolwide mystery, made more sickeningly disturbing by the fact he kept calling her "my sweet" or other words that easily cut the appetite of everyone who heard them being said to a cat. Filch was the caretaker, but the title 'Security guard from hell' could also fit him just as nicely, if not better. He knew every secret passage of the school and could come up at the most unexpected time, waging an apparent all-out war against the students. He also seemed to have some kind of odd psychic connection to Mrs Norris, as he always seemed to pop-up after someone was caught by her.

However, on the detestable side, one was worst than Peeves, Filch and Norris. His name stroke fear deep in the hearts of the other houses, and usually amusement in the Slytherins.

Severus Snape, the potion master.

The potion class took place in the coldest and scariest dungeons Harry had ever seen. Dark and cold, with small windows near the roof and the dim flames lit under the cauldrons being all that gave light and, along with the things better left to the imagination that floated in vials around the walls, gave the dungeon a quite gloomy and scary atmosphere. The fact that they shared the class with the Gryffindors made a forced silence, which made the class even darker.

That morning, Harry had received a message from Hagrid to meet him at his hut. He couldn't wait for the lesson to end, so that he would see his giant friend again. 'course, he wanted to go alone, but Blaise

read over his shoulder and invited herself, managing to pull Draco in with them.

"Can't believe I let myself get pulled into this thing." Draco grumbled.

"'cause you don't want the Gryffies to know about your 'sleeping arrangements'." Harry said with false sweetness.

The blonde boy shot him a dark look as they entered the classroom.

Professor Snape, with his tall shape, sharp dark eyes, greasy black hair and rather large nose, burst into the dungeon just in time for the lesson to start, making his way to his desk in few quick steps. Harry personally thought he looked like an oversized bat. He checked if everyone was here, starting with the Gryffindors. Many of them got themselves a verbal lashing.

"Hermione Granger... oh yes, Minerva told me about you... the know-it-all who can't keep her mouth shut."

She looked visibly hurt and looked down at the stones making the ground, her cheeks reddening.

"Neville Longbottom... he-who-forgets-something-at-least-once-a-day. Teaching you will probably be impossible, considering you probably forgot the first word I said to you already."

The round-faced boy blushed and tried to hide behind his crossed arms.

"Miss Patil, Miss Brown, I suggest you hide that thing before I decide to check if your horoscope include loss of points in the next 10 minutes."

Two girls sitting side-by-side and that had been reading a magazine squeaked and, after wrestling the poor book in a merciless tug-o-war that the Indian-looking girl he had called "Patil" won, hid the damaged pieces of paper in her backpack.

"Ronald Weasley... If you're anything like your twin brothers, you're in for some great trouble, I'm warning you."

Then, he turned to the Slytherins and made more comments about how he knew their parents, and how he expected great things from them.

“Draco Malfoy. Yes, I know your parents. Was here four years under them, but still knew them well... The two best students of Slytherin at that time. Excellent at Potions as well, I expect a lot from you.”

“Miss Parkinson, yes... Met your sister... delightful student, head girl two years ago...”

Pansy glowed with pride and pulled her tongue at the frowning and glaring Gryffindors.

“Harry Potter... our new celebrity.” He said, a tint of dislike in his voice. Everyone turned to look at them, some Gryffindors literally gawking.

Snape’s eyes glared at him like he had seen a worst enemy for the first time in years. Harry gulped. He didn’t like him one bit.

Snape continued, until he went to Blaise.

“Zabini.” He coldly said, not commenting at all but his tone of voice literally oozed of dislike. Harry and Blaise turned and gave each other puzzled looks. What had they done?

Snape walked back in front of the class, standing in front of his desk as he began an apparently practiced class entry.

“You are here to learn the subtle science and the difficult art that is the making of a potion.”

His voice barely above a whisper echoed in the class, yet everyone heard him clearly. Harry personally thought it sounded like a quiet Nemesis. Wait... no, scratch that. It sounded like a quiet snake, since Nemesis would *never* be quiet.

“There is no wand-waving in this class. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses...I can teach

you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death -- if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach."

That entry was direct, rather insulting and followed with a Dudley-heavy silence. Harry returned to his initial thoughts. He did *not* like professor Snape. However, Draco's grin proved him the feeling wasn't unanimous.

"Tell me, Potter." At hearing his name, Harry's head snapped up, pardon the pun, to look at Snape's glaring eyes. "What do you get if you put powdered asphodel roots in an infusion of wormwood?"

Powder of what? Infusion of what? Harry was taken aback. He gave a quick look at Draco, who shrugged. He noted that Granger's hand lifted fast enough to break the sound barrier.

"I don't know sir." Harry replied quietly, wishing someone would talk so his voice wouldn't sound as loud as aunt Petunia's.

"You don't know." Snape hissed, sounding more and more like Nemesis. "It appears celebrity isn't everything in life, is it? Let's try again. Where would you look if I told you to bring me a bezoar?"

Granger's hand once again shot high up so fast that if she kept this up, it would tear off and reach orbit but Harry had no idea what a bezoar was, even less where to find one. He took an instant to wish he had read 1001 herbs and fungi, the only book he had left untouched in the whole collection.

"I don't know sir." Harry whispered, looking down, his fists clenched. What was with this guy?! Why did he only ask those questions to him, and not the others? By now, the Gryffindors were whispering in awe and he managed to catch a:

"Is he badmouthing one of his Slytherins? Potter, no less?"

"You didn't even take time to open one of your books before coming here, did you, Potter?" Snape began again, catching his full attention in mid-flight.

Harry was about to protest when Blaise crushing his foot and shook her head.

“One last question.” Snape said with a sneer. “What’s the difference between monkshood and wolfsbane?”

This time, Granger got up. If he asked another question, she would probably go and get a bright Hufflepuff-yellow panel written “ASK ME!” in flashy letters. And yet again, Snape ignored her and Harry didn’t know the answer.

“I don’t know, sir.” He replied, a tone of irritation evident in his voice. “But I think Granger knows. Maybe you should ask her.” Instead of trying to make me look like an idiot, he mentally added.

There was a couple of laughs and Granger blushed bright red. However, Snape didn’t look happy.

“Sit down!” he barked at her, making her squeak and obey very quickly. “For your information, Potter, know that a mix of asphodel and wormwood give a soporific so strong it is called Draught of the living death. A bezoar is a stone that you can find in a goat’s stomach and that can protect you against most poisons. As for the monkshood and wolfsbane, they are the same plant, also called Aconite. Well? What are you waiting for, write it down!”

Harry quickly took out his notes and scribbled it down, followed by the rest of the class. After one final glare at Blaise and him, he separated them in pairs. Much to his dislike, Harry ended up with Granger, while Blaise was stuck with Longbottom. Snape then walked up to the blackboard at the end of the class and wrote the number 10 down in an exaggeratedly large shape.

“Open your book at page ten, work on the potion written down, to cure furunculous.” He barked, then turned to Longbottom and sneered evilly. “I wrote the number down just so you wouldn’t make a mistake, page 9 is a poison and page 11 a solvent strong enough to melt stone. I am nice, right?”

Harry resisted the urge to ask if it was a rhetorical question as Granger continued drilling him in the recipe.

When Longbottom messed up and melted his first cauldron, ending up with furunculous growing all over him, and after he had sent the clumsy Gryffindor away with Blaise to the infirmary, Snape turned to

him and glared angrily, a light that could only be described as gleeful glowing in his dark eyes.

“And you didn’t find it necessary to warn him, did you, Potter?” Harry almost gasped in surprise. He couldn’t possibly... “Thought that if he messed his potion up, it would make you look brilliant? That’ll cost you one point from Slytherin.”

And everyone in the class gawked as the bell rang.

“Darn, he must really hate you...” Crabbe said after the class. “My bro told me he *never* took a single point from Slytherin before.”

“Well I’m flattered, then.” Harry snapped dryly and sarcastically. “I have the honor of being Snape’s scapegoat.”

“You’re not the only one,” Blaise said as she returned, looking particularly angry and with a bandage around her left hand. “you know what I learned? We get a huge project to do in 2 weeks, and we keep the partner he set us with!”

Harry groaned. “Oh great, I have to suffer through Granger’s incessant drilling... I swear she could replace Binns one day!”

“Count yourself lucky she can actually do a potion right. I swear, I did *all* the work, all he did was add those porcupine quills and BOOM!” She let out a loud, exasperated sigh. “I’m gonna fail because of the loser of Gryffindor.”

After dinner, Blaise and Harry pulled a reluctant and struggling Draco outside of school, toward Hagrid’s hut.

“Why do I have to visit that big oaf already?!” Draco asked, trying to get his arm free from Blaise’s iron grasp.

“Because it’s the nice thing to do.” Harry replied, not even looking at him.

"I am *not* nice! C'mon, let me go!" The black-haired boy, who had seen that one coming for light-years, tightened his hold on Draco's other arm as a response, before turning his head toward the boy.

"You wouldn't want Hagrid to hear about Frilly, right? Who knows, maybe I'll slip if you aren't there to make sure I don't..." He said mischievously.

The platinum-haired boy blushed, looked down and muttered a threat to Harry's life, before finally starting to walk forward, a definite air of resignation surrounding him like an aura. Behind him, Harry and Blaise shared a snicker.

"Mastered blackmail already, didn't you, Potter?" Blaise asked with a smirk.

Harry shrugged. "Well, with a dormitory partner that sleeps with a green with blue dots stuffed dragon... There it is, Hagrid's hut!"

Sure enough, the disproportioned wooden house just outside the forbidden forest became visible. Harry knocked on the door while Blaise gawked at the large crossbow near the door. Draco just looked around, probably to make sure no one would spot him meeting Hagrid.

"Hagrid? It's us!" Harry said after knocking, his voice partially covered by loud barks.

"Jus' a minit!" They heard Hagrid's rough voice say, before the door partly opened, revealing the large man who was holding back a huge dog. "Oh, yeh brought yer friends with yeh, too!"

Harry nodded. "Is that all right?"

Hagrid gave a look at Draco, seemed to hesitate a bit before nodding. "Yeah, c'min. Ca'm down, Fang."

The door opened widely, revealing the inside of the house. Hagrid let go of Fang, who promptly jumped on Draco and proceeded to 'clean his face', much to the blonde boy's disgust. It was a rather large, one room house with a huge bed covered with a quilt, a scrubbed wooden

table, surrounded by wooden chairs and a fireplace, in which a copper kettle was boiling over an open fire. Hagrid, in it all, stood nearly halfway toward the very high up roof covered in dead birds and other animals. Harry noticed Draco looked disgusted at everything inside, but it could also have been because he was still cleaning up the remains of Fang's drool off his face.

"So, what d'yeh think so far?" Hagrid asked after they had sat down and he had given them tea and cookies that looked like they had been made out of rocks.

Harry proceeded to tell him what had happened so far. He felt comfortable with Hagrid, like some kind of giant older brother. Blaise looked a bit shy, however, while Draco kept his arms crossed and looked around in a displaced arrogant air. Harry made a mental note to talk to him about that.

"Mam' McGonagall's probably jealous." Hagrid noted. "I mean, ev'ryone thought yeh'd be in Gryff'ndor, so did she, 'parently."

Harry let out a sigh. "Great, so McGonagall hates me because I'm not in her house, and Snape hates me because I am."

"Fessor Snape hates yeh?" Hagrid asked, not looking extremely surprised. "I shoulda known. Just the kinda guy teh hold grudges, that man, and it's not 'cause yer in his house."

"Grudges? But why? Why does he hate me so much?"

"It's not meh job teh tell yeh that, it's between Snape and yeh."

Harry gave Hagrid a look, making him look away. Evidently, the giant man knew what was going on, but wouldn't tell.

"Hey, what's that?" Blaise asked, taking the newspaper. "Robbery at Gringotts? Isn't that impossible?"

"Yeah, I heard about that." Draco said, nodding. "My dad had that odd look when he heard it... He says only the darkest of all mages could try to rob something at Gringotts and get out alive and uncaught."

"I'm sure yer dad'd know all 'bout that." Hagrid grumbled.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Draco asked, frowning.

Hagrid opened his mouth to retort when Blaise let out a startled gasp. “Harry!” She said, turning the newspaper toward him. “Look at the date of the robbery!”

The front page of the newspaper showed: “Robbery at Gringotts!”, a quite catchy headline, as it always should. Just below, a moving picture showed a familiar-looking vault with goblins and wizards looking around for clues. Harry looked for the date of the robbery and was surprised to read July thirty-first.

“That’s the day we were there!” Harry gasped, taking the article and beginning to read it out loud. “Fortunately, the vault that the thief attacked had been emptied the same day.” came out louder than the rest.

Harry gave a look at Hagrid, who was purposefully looking at the fire. The vault 713 *had* been emptied the same day, even though it had only contained a tiny package. Evidently, the object there was *quite* valuable if someone had taken the risk of entering Gringotts to get it.

But what could be *that* valuable, and who could be powerful enough – and have so little to lose – to risk robbing the most guarded bank of the world?

He had a nagging feeling he didn’t want to find out.

Chapter 4: *Flying lessons*

Harry's first weekend at Hogwarts was spent in the Slytherin common room. Not once were the words Gringotts, Snape, McGonagall or homework mentioned as they passed their time, Draco and Blaise arguing over Quidditch teams and Harry watching his friends' antics and silently speaking to Nemesis. Later, Draco revealed his talent at chess by clobbering the two others to the ground, before getting challenged and beaten by Flint, the Quidditch captain. Of course, it was Slytherin chess, which meant double-crossing, deceptions and cheating were a must.

The Slytherins and the Gryffindors were, as Harry quickly discovered, in some kind of cold war. True enough, it was getting colder and colder in the potions classroom, but it wasn't for that reason. He noticed that if someone from Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff tried to get close to the Gryffindors, there was no problem, but as soon as there was a Slytherin, they were shunned, and not just by the lions. He quickly guessed none of the other houses liked Slytherin much, rallying behind the house who was most likely to win against them.

"They're just jealous." Draco said when Harry had told his observation. "We're the top house, that means they have to work harder to get the same results we do."

Nevertheless, Harry found it a bit unsettling that everyone outside of their own house hated them.

True to Blaise's words, Snape assigned them a monster assignment to do with their partners during the next class, an assignment that would count on their final grade and would take two whole months to prepare: Make a dose of "Skele-grow". As he had feared, Harry was stuck with Granger and Blaise, to her absolute horror, was *still* stuck with Longbottom. And when she tried to protest, Snape had given her the very first Slytherin detention of the year. Acclamations and trumpets did *not* follow.

"I'm gonna fail potions, I'm gonna fail potions..." became Blaise's personal mantra, while Harry preferred a "I gonna go crazy, I'm gonna go crazy". Draco, who was with Pansy, who was averagely good in potions, couldn't help but snicker at his two friends.

The bad news didn't end there. Harry had been looking forward to learning to fly since Mrs Zabini had told him about Quidditch. Imagine his horror when he found out Potions wasn't the only class the Slytherins had with the Gryffindors.

"Bloody Gryffindors, always ruining everything for us." Blaise grumbled as they headed toward the great hall that morning. Harry nodded and sighed a reply.

"Now, not only do I have to make a fool out of myself on a broom, but I have to do it in front of them."

As they entered the great hall and headed for the Slytherin table, Harry noticed that Hermione was apparently reading flying tips out of a book, to which some Gryffindors were listening. To his great surprise, however, Pansy also seemed interested in the lecture, copying Hermione's demonstration on how to hold a broom correctly.

"I doubt you'll make a fool out of yourself if you're anything like your dad was, Harry." Blaise noted. "He's in the Quidditch hall of fame in the trophy room. Gryffindor chaser, he was."

"And how do you know?" Harry asked.

Blaise glared at the air, her fists clenching around an imaginary neck, her mouth twisting into a demonic sneer. Harry wouldn't have been surprised to see vampire fangs in her mouth, or her eyes turn red.

"Snape had me clean up *every single bloody trophy* in that stupid room *without* magic." She hissed. "He said I was lucky he didn't owl mom and dad. I almost wish he did, she would have bloody *killed* him."

Harry chuckled, imagining a irate Mrs Zabini strangling Snape to submission. Yup, he liked that mental picture.

They sat down just as the owls flew in, carrying the morning mail. An old, grey fluff of feather made a crash landing directly in Ron Weasley's soup while, beside him, a true owl gracefully dropped a package directly on Longbottom's head. While Weasley handed the soaked letter to his twin brothers, Longbottom unrolled the round package. Curious, Draco got up and pranced toward the Gryffindor

table, Crabbe and Goyle following with grins. Harry found it safer to stay at the Slytherin table. Didn't want to give reasons for Snape to give him punishment after all.

The blonde boy stepped up to Longbottom and grabbed whatever it was, a round ball of glass in which grayish smoke floated. Weasley immediately got up and snapped at Draco to give it back, which he did when Professor McGonagall walked up to him. He walked right back to Harry and Blaise, while Crabbe and Goyle gave the Gryffindors parting sneers.

"It's a rememberall." Draco said, then, to Harry's puzzled look "A ball that glows red if you forget something."

Harry gave another look at the Gryffindor table. Sure enough, the ball in Longbottom's hand was red.

Blaise grinned and leaned back, a victorious air in her voice as she sang "I'm *not* gonna fail potions, I'm *not* gonna fail potions..."

"How come?"

"Well, if Longbottom does the smart thing and brings the rememberall to class, we can use it to know if we're forgetting an ingredient, or if we're doing something wrong!"

"That's *if* Longbottom does the smart thing and cheats," Draco said. "and since he's Longbottom, thus stupid, and a Gryffindor, thus even stupider and honest, I doubt it's gonna happen."

Blaise pouted and crossed her arms, a calculating look in her eyes. "Maybe I can make him bring it. I'll see what I can do."

"Well, if you find a way to make Granger mute, give me a shout." Harry sighed in defeat.

Breakfast came and went, and after it came the flying class, which most students waited eagerly. Listening to the other first year Slytherins' stories, it sounded like each one of them had tried flying before, or at least mounted a broom. Of course, it also meant that there was a lot of room for bragging and Draco found himself in his

element as he told a fascinating 'true' story in which he narrowly escaped a muggle helicopter, a group of rampaging dragons in the middle of downtown London, managing to fly *inside* Malfoy manor with a Manticore after him only to land after heroically saving a fair maiden from a certainly fatal fall in the Thames river. Never mind how he got back all the way from southern Scotland, in which Draco told him Malfoy Manor was located, to London in a few seconds, or heard the fair maiden's scream from all the way over there. Blaise wasn't any better, claiming that she had flown just 3 meters over the muggle-busy streets of Rome without being spotted, when she was only 3 years old.

It took place in one of the courtyards of the castle, in which a short grey-haired woman with hawk-like yellow eyes was standing in front of two rows of old and bendy brooms that had evidently seen better days.

"We're supposed to fly on *those*?!" Draco hissed in protest. "What are they, *Oakshaft 79s*?"

Blaise shook her head. "Naa, they're probably older. D'you think they had brooms at the founding?"

"If they did, it was those." Draco noted, pointing at the broom in front of him. Harry looked down at them and had to admit they looked in a very bad shape, unlike the Cleansweeps six and seven at the Zabini's home

"Silence, please!" The teacher shouted, her yellow eyes frowning at Draco, who promptly shut up. Already got in trouble with one teacher that morning, better not make it two.

"I am madam Hooch, your flying instructor. During this class, you will listen to my every command, or you will be expelled faster than you can say Quidditch. If I say land, you land. If I say lift off, you lift off." She glared at all of them, her eyes making Harry shudder. Unusual eye colors unnerved him, for some reason.

"Put your hand over your brooms and say 'UP!'"

"UP!" The students said at the same time.

Harry and Draco's broom immediately shot up in their hands, but they were the only ones who managed it. Granger's broom lazily turned on itself while Longbottom's might as well have been a bag of potatoes; it simply refused to move. On their side, Blaise's was trembling its way up, a bit like an old man climbing stairs, while Crabbe's was apparently edging away from his hand and Goyle's refused to move, until it suddenly shot up and smacked on his forehead.

Madam Hooch showed them how to mount their brooms correctly, then verified how they held it. To his surprise, Harry had done it perfectly, while Draco got a verbal lashing for having flown for years in a wrong way.

"When I blow in my whistle, kick at the ground to lift off. Kick as hard as you can. You will go up one or two meters, then land immediately by bending forward a bit."

She started a countdown, but Longbottom, with his usual clumsiness, accidentally lifted off and shot high up, accidentally pulling his broom to a very fast climb, much to the boy's horror.

"Bend down! Lower the broom!" Hooch barked.

However, Longbottom did another mistake, instead of going down, he made the broom go faster. Panicked, he managed to do *another* mistake, turning straight toward a tower, slamming into it in a very loud crack. The broom did a downward arc and stuck itself into the ground, while the boy fell down, his cape catching against a torch-holder, suspending him nearly 30 meters above the ground with nothing but air in between.

Hooch got on her broom and, expertly, flew up to him, rescuing him. Unfortunately, the cape was in a bad shape; one of the pockets inside ripped open and...

"My rememberall!" Longbottom wailed as he saw the object fall, already too far for him to get it.

Harry tensed up. If that rememberall broke, there went Blaise's hope for a good potion grade! He quickly mounted his broom and shot up to catch it. The object was already halfway down and falling faster

and faster. He had climbed too high and now had to dive to even have a chance at getting it.

'Only one try at this' Harry thought grimly, pushing the old broom faster. He was nearly there...

1 meter...

a few inches...

His fingers closed on the glass ball. Wasting no time, he pulled the broom up to stabilize himself, realizing he had only been a couple of inches from the ground. One more second and he would have had to visit the infirmary. Holding the rememberall triumphantly above him, he landed close to the other students.

"Harry, now you're in for it." Blaise hissed.

Harry was about to ask why, when he noticed she wasn't looking at him, and neither was anyone else. They were looking *behind* him.

"What is the meaning of this stunt you just pulled, mister Potter?" A familiar, cold hiss came to his ears.

Harry turned around, almost afraid of what he'd find. Just as he had feared, it was Professor Snape, looking as sour as ever but with an odd, calculating glint in his eyes. The boy opened his mouth to reply but Snape interrupted.

"Trying to show off in front of everyone, are you? Follow me."

After one final fearful glance at Draco and Blaise, he followed the teacher inside the school. Never had the stone walls looked so cold, never had the flaming torches been so dim, never had the stairs to the dungeons been so proud to bear the writing "*Abandon all hope, all ye who enter*".

As Snape guided him deeper below the school, Harry's mind reeled in thought after thought, as if salvaging the floating remains of a sunk vessel.

"*Am I gonna get expelled?*" was pretty much the biggest of all, which, continuing on the above metaphor, could only be compared to

someone trying to reel in a 2-ton anchor with a Fisher Price fishing rod. If such a thing exists, copyrights and apologies.

"They can't send me back to the Dursleys, they just can't!" an image of himself ringing at the Dursley's doorbell with his trunk in tow came to his mind. *"Oh, they'd have a field day with that..."* Then, Mrs Zabini's horrified and remorseful look at his being denied the right to learn magic... his faceless parents' shame... and Snape's victorious look, his dark eyes turning red with snake-like irises... a high-pitched laugh...

So caught up in his thoughts was he that he didn't notice Snape opening the door to his office, a flat piece of wood with only a handle as decoration that promptly slammed against his face, effectively (and painfully) pulling him back to the world of the living with more efficiency than Dudley sitting on him...

...ok, enough with the exaggerations, that was going a bit far. Dudley sitting on someone had more chance of sending him to the land of the *dead* than the *living*.

"I see you are much more graceful on a broom than on the ground, that's at least one good point for you." Snape sneered as Harry, still rubbing his aching forehead, entered in the office.

Quaint and simple, the office was nothing but an almost perfectly square room with a round wooden table on which piled up essays separated by their house, apparently, a simple, thin bed with a very small dark green sheet on it, a small fireplace and a drawer on which picture frames were turning away from the center of the room, one of them face-down. Personally, Harry thought it was too empty, too cold for him to stand living in there. It looked like the man had nothing but work left in his life.

"Harry Potter. The boy-who-lived-to-find-himself-in-my-office-during-his-second-week-at-Hogwarts. Typical Potters."

Harry bowed his head, only to hide the "drop down dead, please" glare that had appeared on his face.

"I saw everything that happened, mister Potter. And frankly, I'm not impressed. I guess Potter's claim was true, there really *is* a daredevil

gene in the family. And *evidently* it's *especially* strong in you. Thinking you can bring yourself a bit more fame through catching a trinket for Neville "I got gifted with two left everything" Longbottom, I suppose. If anything, you made yourself look like a Gryffindor."

Harry's glare intensified and his fists clenched tightly. That was the worst insult you could get from Snape, from what other Slytherins had said. Deep, slow and echoing footsteps indicated to the boy that Snape had started pacing in a circle.

"Harry Potter, the boy-who-lived, defender of the weak and the *stupid*. It sure sounds good, does it." He hissed, glaring at Harry so strongly the boy could feel it through his hair. "No it doesn't. That's for Gryffindors. You're a Slytherin, for goodness' sake act like one!"

The man stopped pacing and turned directly to Harry.

"Nevertheless... an obvious natural skill like yours deserves to be exploited." He said in a much calmer manner. Harry looked up in surprise.

"Sir?"

"Follow me, Potter," Snape said, opening the door. "I have to present you to someone."

More puzzled than afraid, Harry followed Snape back up in the castle up to the third floor, turning toward the Charms corridor. Was he gonna ask Flitwick to help him with his punishment? As impossible and ridiculous as it sounded, it was the only explanation Harry's mind came up with, though he truly wished it was the case -- Flitwick was, true to Mrs Zabini's words, the softest teacher of the school.

Snape didn't even bother to knock on the door, simply opened it and peered in, rather rudely interrupting Flitwick's lesson.

"...cantanion is... can I help you, Serverus?"

Ignoring the small teacher, he simply hissed "Flint, come here."

Flint? The prefect? Oh, things were getting better and better... maybe he'd stick Flint after him all day long... and Harry had seen enough of the rude prefect the first day.

Tall, burly and with hair messy enough to make combs scramble in fright, bearing two dark and rather scary eyes on a sharp and angular face, Flint was not one who inspired safety. Harry shivered, thinking of having that boy following him around all the time, trailing his every moves...

"Flint, I believe you said you weren't satisfied with the Higgs' performance last year."

Flint roughly grunted with a nod of agreement.

"Nearly lost the cup 'cause of that idiot not spotting the snitch until Brown nearly tore his ear off. Even worse, 'cause of him, we lost to *Hufflepuff!*"

Snitch? They were talking Quidditch? But why?

"Yes, yes, that's was very embarrassing, I must admit, but you and I are already aware of all this." Snape stopped Flint's rant with a careless wave. Apparently, Snape didn't care much for Quidditch. "I heard you were looking for a reserve Seeker, just in case."

Flint grunted again, giving a look at Harry. "And why is he here?"

"Mister Potter, in his first ever flying lesson, with no precedent flying experience unless he decided to steal his neighbors' brooms and managed an unnoticed flight in the middle of Little Whinging, has managed to catch a small, falling, barely visible object and inch from the ground by diving down and managed to escape any harmful side-effect other than an inflated ego." Ignoring Harry's scowl, Snape continued "I do not consider myself an expert on Quidditch, but I do believe that such a feat deserves attention, especially from a first year."

Flint gave him a searching look, then turned back to Snape. "I'll have to see what he can do. Even though he can't actually have a broom since he's a firstie, he might get a place in the reserves."

Snape nodded at Flint and turned to Harry. "See you for detention tonight at 8, at the Quidditch pitch."

Harry nodded, his mind numb. Had he just been offered a place in the Quidditch team? Yes he had! Trying to hold back the grin threatening to break his face, he nodded and turned around, walking away from the charms classroom back down to the dungeons.

When he arrived at the Slytherin common room with a huge smile reaching to his glasses, Draco and Blaise's first reaction was to give him a "Now-what-did-Snape-made-you-test" look, before asking him to explain what happened, which he did, the rest of the first years coming over during the time. Of course, Harry skipped over the parts where Snape insulted him, which none of them picked up.

"Seeker on the Quidditch team? Then you'd be the youngest player in the century!" Draco said with a gasp.

Harry nodded. "They're gonna test me out tonight at eight.

"You lucky, lucky thing... I wish I had tried to help Longbottom... as appalling as that sound."

"Well then, next time he's on a broom, I'll give you a shout." Harry joked.

Evening came quickly and, after being wished luck, Harry left the common room, following Flint to the Quidditch pitch.

Huge, oval-shaped and as only features six hoops perched on fifty-foot-tall poles, the quidditch pitch was surrounded by stands which would probably be full by the time a match started.

Harry took one of the school brooms, which looked like it had been charmed and carved by a first year Hufflepuff, then met Professor Snape on the pitch, standing beside a box of ping-pong balls.

The exercise was simple; Flint would throw the ping-pong balls and he had to catch them all. He quickly found something out as he caught ball after ball: he loved to fly. It seemed as natural to him as moving an arm. Before long, the box was empty and, as he landed, he noticed Flint's huge grin and Snape's satisfied look.

"Every single one of them... He caught them all!!" Flint gasped, looking like Christmas had come early.

“Which is excellent, certainly.”

Flint gave a look at Snape. “Any way he can have his own broom?”

Snape nodded. “Our dear Headmaster owes me a favor. He can bend the rules to allow mister Potter his own broom. However, I doubt he can make it on the main team this year, unless Higgs suddenly suffers some... unexpected injury.”

Flint nodded, eyes glinting. For some reason, Harry suddenly felt pity for this ‘Higgs’, who ever that is.

Harry took the broom back inside, but before he was about to leave, he found himself face-to-face with Snape.

“Where are you going, mister Potter?”

“Erm... back to the common room?”

“Did I say your detention was over? No. Follow me.”

And Harry spent the rest of his otherwise happy evening grumpily dissecting frogs and emptying their guts in a barrel. And when he returned, the night was already well on it’s way, the air was colder and the showers nearly more.

His assumptions became cemented: He hated Professor Snape.

Chapter 5: *Fluffy, Frights and Friends*

The relationship between Harry and Snape didn't improve over the following weeks. In fact, they only got worse. By himself, Harry lost 20 points to Slytherin, all of those taken by Snape, while none of the other teachers found anything bad about him. While Harry was losing points, Snape made sure that Draco gained twice as much. As such, answering a simple question awarded the platinum-haired boy up to ten points. The black-haired boy could have handled all of this if it wasn't for the comments the Gryffindors were passing to him.

"Thanks for the help, Potter!"

"Next class, can you lose a bit more points?"

"Win points for us while you're at it!"

Harry was feeling quite irritated after the first week of those, but managed to hold himself back from murdering a few of his fellow students. One Gryffindor got on his nerves, however, no matter how much he tried to ignore her. The fact he had to work with her didn't help.

"Stir it ten times clockwise, then counter-clockwise, add a pinch of powdered beetle eyes, repeat ten times."

Harry started stirring with the wooden spoon usually used for it, following Granger's instructions, counting the number of times he moved the content. One, two, three...

"No, no, no...! You're doing it all wrong! You've got to stir it faster than that..."

Once again, Harry felt his patience take a blow, and his sanity scream and crack a bit more. He gave a dark look at Snape, who was turning around Blaise's and Longbottom's table, as Granger stole his spoon and started stirring in a way he found nearly equal to his, tuning out the girl's constant drilling.

'Doesn't she ever shut up?' He thought in annoyance. 'I pity the Gryffindors.'

“Are you listening?! You have to stir it in a wave, it’s much more efficient than...”

Harry let out an exasperated mental sigh as she continued her lecture, making him sincerely wish he had brought a walkman or something to block her voice out.

The potion was, fortunately, going nicely. While Granger was more irritating than a swarm of opera-signing-mosquitoes in the middle of a swamp at forty degrees Celsius, she knew how to make a potion. While not being able to work in team without endangering the sanity of her partner, the mere fact that she knew the recipe by heart assured them a good grade. At least they would pass, but Harry wasn’t sure he was going to last long enough to see it.

Any other class, outside of Potions, was going nicely. Astronomy was a total bore, in both Blaise’s and Harry’s opinions, with added problem that it was in the middle of the night. Draco didn’t have the same view on it however, probably since one of the constellations bore his name. He even got up to telling the gullible Crabbe and Goyle that the stars were actually named after him, which the boys believed with a tiny bit of skepticism.

Soon, something else than the usual classes went and attacked Harry’s timetable fiercely, tearing a hole into it, where Thursday’s ‘free time’ was written. Quidditch practice was the name of the beast. Quote the captain, sleep nevermore.

On the morning of the twentieth, during mail, a great black owl flew down and dropped a long package straight at Harry, a bit like a javelin. The address said it was from Snape, which made it even more likely to be a javelin. But it wasn’t a javelin. It was a broom. Close enough, though.

“A Nimbus 2000...” Draco gasped. “...they’re the best ones on the market... at least for this year. Dad said something about a Nimbus 2001 coming out next year.”

Harry grinned and looked at it. Even to him, who knew virtually nothing about brooms, it was beautiful. He couldn’t wait to ride it.

And ride it he did.

The team was, Flint, Pucey and Montague as chasers, Derrick and Bole as the beaters, Bletchley as keeper and Potter as the seeker. Pucey looked like a nice guy, perhaps the only one on the team. Montague seemed to dislike him. Derrick and Bole, both mountains of muscles, towered over Harry and seemed to think he was too puny to be playing Quidditch. And the youngest player in a century was starting to believe it.

However, it all changed when he was on the field. As soon as he lifted off, he felt it. Flying was *his* talent. In the air, even with the whipping wind, the risk of falling off the thin wooden flight instrument he couldn't even properly feel because of the cushioning charms, he felt as at ease, if not more so, than on the ground. Back at the flying class, he had been too worried to enjoy the feeling, but now...

"Head's up!! Or not!"

...but now he was interrupted from enjoying it by a budger passing straight over him, bringing his head back to where it was, and not to where it would be if one of the budgers hit him.

Flint was ruthless on the field, especially to the beaters, those, quote, "responsible for the enemy losing an arm or two". Harry was not given an easy time even if he was new on the team; he and Higgs would compete for the snitch, while the beaters tried to kill them both, along with everyone else on the team. Harry soon understood the Slytherin team's motto: "Let us win, but if we cannot win, let us break a few heads.". Flint was also a great fan of the Falmouth Falcons and 'lightly' inspired his techniques – and motto – off theirs.

Two times a week, they nearly killed themselves. Another two times a week, Harry risked his sanity and Blaise every part of her body in the potion class. Two potions had already exploded, resulting in term failure for the students, unless they did loads of extra work; Patil and Brown's and Weasley and Thomas'. Oddly enough, the two entirely Gryffindor teams the closest to Draco. Not that he was suspected at all, of course. If Snape went to extreme limits to make Harry's life miserable, saying the same about Draco's was lying. It was obvious, to Gryffindors and Slytherins alike, that Snape liked him.

About as obvious as the sky is blue. Perhaps more.

“Biased git.” Harry heard Weasley mutter as they came out of the dungeons. Thomas seemed to agree; both had spent their entire morning copying full pages of their book. Harry had to agree with him; Snape was a biased git.

“C’mon, Harry, we’ll be late for DADA.”

Harry let out a loud sigh at Blaise’s voice.

“What a day though, learn the ‘1001 ways to be evil and annoy people for no reason’ taught by S. ‘slimy’ Snape, then it’s ‘Stuttering and you, class 101’ by S. ‘Scared-of-Shadow’ Quirrell.”

They shared a chuckle as they climbed up the stairs, taking a quick walk on the third floor halls.

“Eww, what’s that smell?!” Blaise complained, blocking her nose.

“Sorry ‘bout that!” A loud, booming voice came. Coming out of the nearest turn was Hagrid, carrying a large red-tinted bag over his shoulder. The bag reeked of blood and raw meat.

“What’s that?” Harry asked, his voice coming out oddly from behind the cape he had put in front of his mouth and nose.

“Uh... can’t tell yeh that, sorry.” Hagrid said, looking around nervously. “Now, yeh three better leave. C’mon, I bet yeh have a class teh go teh now...”

He ushered them away, not the way they were intending to go, as he went the other way, disappearing down the next corner. The three shot each other a look.

“Do we follow him?” Harry asked.

“You bet.” Blaise replied with a grin.

They did so, following the stench more than the sight of the gigantic man. The fact that the bag was dripping crimson drops helped as well, leaving a trail for them to follow.

“Pathetically easy.” Draco noted.

Harry shrugged. "Who's complaining?" He said, before looking ahead. "It looks like he's going toward the forbidden corridor."

Just as Harry had suspected, the trail led them to the forbidden corridor. The door was partly open and Hagrid's booming voice could be heard from the other side.

"Here yeh go, Fluffy! Raw an' fresh, jus' how yeh like it!"

"Fluffy?" Draco asked, disbelievingly. "Ten sickles it's a dragon."

"Deal." Blaise whispered back as they edged closer to the door. Whoever said curiosity killed the cat was thoroughly ignored.

They gave a look inside and...

"That *thing* is called **Fluffy**?!" Draco hissed in alarm.

Big enough to fill the entire room, never mind how it got there, with three snarling heads equipped with bloodied sets of jaws currently busy tearing meat apart under the proud eye of Hagrid was something that the description of a deformed, overgrown dog would fit best. Its growling was loud enough to make the door tremble and, quite definitely, freeze Harry's blood.

'*Why would that **thing** be here?!*' Harry wondered, looking around. Something caught his attention. There, between the dog's enormous paws was a trap door.

"C'mon, let's get out of here before Hagrid sees us." Blaise hissed, pulling Harry and Draco away.

The three of them went back to their original location, stilled with shock. Harry told them his observation.

"It's probably here to guard something." Draco mused. "There's no other reason for Dumbledore to allow that *thing* in here, unless he doesn't know."

“How likely is that? From what I heard, he’s nearly omniscient. Mom reckons he can read minds.” Blaise noted.

They were silent until they reached Quirrell’s classroom just as the bell rang. As they sat down, Blaise turned toward Draco and grinned.

“You owe me ten sickles.”

Time passed quickly enough that, before they could notice, it was Halloween, and the mystery of the dog vanished behind the thick layers of work. As first years, they didn’t get much of it, except in Transfiguration and Potions, though Snape seemed *very* selective on who got the long end of the homework assignments. While the papers he had handed to Draco, Crabbe and Goyle were done within the hour, Blaise and Harry often struggled to finish them before the sun went down. And the potion still wasn’t finished.

“Is it supposed to boil that much?” Harry asked.

Granger gave a look at the nearly overflowing cauldron and went back to cutting roots as precisely as she humanly could – Harry expected her to bring a laser cutter anytime now – and barked him an order.

“Adjust the fire, turn it lower.”

Harry did so, remarking with a relieved look that the boiling passed somewhat. Hermione shot the potion another look and let out a frustrated sigh.

“No, that’s too low... Turn it up a notch.”

‘Make up your mind, girl...’ Harry mentally hissed, turning the fire back up with a tap of his wand at the simple block out of which a flame was coming out. The flame started up again and Hermione gave him a glare.

“That’s too high again.” She noted. “Can’t you do anything right?”

“Well do it yourself then, Granger.” He snarled angrily. Normally, he was calm. But this girl had the talent of getting under anyone’s skin.

“Temper, Potter. One more point from Slytherin.”

Harry clenched his fists under the table and held himself back from throwing a non-verbal curse at the obnoxious teacher.

History of magic, which was the class just after, was much better for his nerves. So much better, actually, that he fell asleep in it, waking up to find out he had dozed off on his notes. When class was over, he told Blaise and Draco to start eating without him and headed toward the boys’ bathroom to clean the ink – and the embarrassing words it formed – up.

“Stupid.” He chided himself, wiping the final letter of “Hargug the Hideous” off his cheek. When it was done, he walked out of the bathroom, only to be nearly rammed into by a familiar bushy-haired girl, dashing toward the girls’ bathroom. Before he could snap at her, he noticed she was crying. A stall door slammed from inside and louder sobs could be heard.

“Hey, you ok there, Granger?” He asked from outside.

When he received no answer, he shrugged, seeing as the two other Gryffindor girls were coming in fast. It wasn’t his problem anymore.

‘Probably got on the nerves of someone more... vocal than me.’ He mused.

The rest of the day passed quickly. Charms was easy; levitation charms was something the first year Slytherins had mostly all tried and managed (against the rules of course). Except Goyle who, despite an unusual skill for plants, was totally inept at wand-waving. As for Defense against the dark arts... well... no comments there. Another entire lesson wasted on a silly vampire story out of which Quirrell was the hero, defeating the creature through some brave and rather crazy and unbelievable act, and saving an entire village from it. Not that any vampire can drink that much. Plus, with the stuttering... well, I’ll stop here. You get the idea, dear reader.

The great hall that afternoon was, in one word, impressive. Pumpkins floated over the tables, which were full of every kind of food imaginable. Ghosts floated merrily overhead. The Gryffindor ghost was scaring a bunch of Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws with a silly ghost story, pardon the pun. He quickly found Draco, who was talking to Crabbe and Goyle, and Blaise, who was filling her plate with more strawberry-flavored things than anyone should be allowed to.

He gave a glance at the Gryffindor table. He easily spotted Weasley – red hair and all – talking to Finnigan and Thomas. The two Gryffindor girls from earlier weren't very far, either, but no sign of Granger.

'Shame, she'll miss the feast.' He thought, sitting down in front of Blaise and filling his plate. Thoughts of the bushy, bossy-haired... erm, I mean... bossy, bushy-haired girl left his head as food entered his stomach.

Everything was going nicely, when suddenly the doors burst open and a very terrorized Quirrell – more than usual, I mean – ran in, yelling loud enough for all to hear:

“TROLL!!! TROLL IN THE DUNGEONS!!!”

He stopped, took a deep breath and continued.

“Thought you'd want to know...”

...and he collapsed.

Ever wonder what a huge, 15 feet-tall dragon breathing fire hot enough to melt a car in pieces landing into a feast could do? Not me, I got better things to do. My theory is wide-spread panic, like the one that happened at that moment in the great hall, as everyone stumbled and ran for the exit, Draco probably first in line.

Dumbledore got up, took out his wand and shot azure sparks out of it, bellowing a single word.

“SILENCE!!”

To which no one had an answer to. Causing a, you guessed it, silence.

“Prefects, guide the students back to the common rooms. The feast will continue there. Teachers, follow me.”

In a much more organized manner, the students evacuated. A red head Gryffindor prefect who probably was Weasley’s brother (or one of them) guided the first years of his house away. However, Harry noticed one of them going away from the fray.

‘Well, well, Weasley. Disobeying orders from the headmaster?’ He wondered, intentionally staying as far back as he could from the other Slytherins. Then, at the first occasion, he swiftly ducked away from view, hoping the prefect didn’t see him.

When he was assured he was safe, he quickly headed back, easily finding Weasley walking toward where he remembered the bathrooms being.

“You know, unless Gryffindor has really low standards and doesn’t even have a bathroom in their common room, I don’t think you can’t wait that much.”

Weasley whirled around at his voice, a look a surprise on his face.

“Potter! What on earth...”

“Could ask you the same question, Weasley.”

The red-haired boy gave him a cold glare. He was about to reply when they heard a high-pitched, definitely girly scream come from some distance away.

“Hermione!” Weasley gasped in horror. Harry understood.

“Granger’s still in the bathrooms?!” He asked.

“Why should you care? Oh yeah, she’s your potion—”

Harry gave him an annoyed glare. While he didn’t actually consider her a friend, he wasn’t heartless enough to ignore the risk of her being seriously hurt. “We’ll talk later. Let’s go save her. Truce?”

Ron gave a look at his outstretched hand in disgust, before shaking it quickly – and dropping it like it's favorite past time was spreading the plague – answering

“Only temporarily.”

“Deal.” Harry agreed.

A crashing noise was heard, along with another scream. Both boys came to their senses and ran to help the girl.

Standing nearly three meters tall, wielding a club a third that long and apparently solid enough to turn toilets into objects that would make a junkyard jealous, smelling like it had taken a 400 miles marathon through dirty sewer waters without deodorant, without taking a shower before nor after and not bathed once in his life, the troll was slowly advancing toward Hermione, it's dumb eyes locked on the terrorized girl hiding under a sink.

“Oi, pea-brain!” Weasley shouted, throwing a toilet piece at the troll, which impacted with an oddly hollow sound that could have come from either the sad remains of a ‘throne of souls’ or the monster's empty cranium commonly known as ‘head’.

[A/N: Sorry, a little Evangelion omake riff here... *snicker*]

The troll, while it may not have felt the hit, definitely heard the insult. If it registered it or not remained a mystery only to the dumbest of all. Like a *troll* can register a complicated insult like pea-brain. *clears throat* Back to the story. Sorry peeps.

It slowly turned around, stopping to look at the mirror, where it saw Weasley's reflection. With a snarl, the troll smashed his club against the mirror, shattering it in pieces. Harry heard a gulp coming from Weasley's throat as the black-haired boy sneaked silently behind the troll, intent on helping Granger, who was staring, terrified and frozen under the sink, at the troll. He managed to reach her and grab her shoulder, but she wouldn't move.

“C'mon, move, Granger!” He hissed, pulling harder. “I don't think you want to become a monument to Picasso anymore than me!”

A shrill gasp came from her, making him whirl around. It's attention taken by the noise, the troll had turned around and looking at Harry, something akin to surprise in it's eyes, a surprise that faded quickly, in troll standards. Slowly, it took a step toward them, lifting the club over it's head. And it would bring it down on them if he didn't do something.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" He shouted the first thing that came to his mind, pointing his wand at the club.

The club hand of the troll went down. Had Harry not acted, the sound would probably have been akin to a dozen of bones breaking at the same time. Instead, to the creature's great surprise, it's hand now held nothing. It looked around it, as if expecting his club to be tap-dancing on some unfortunate toilet's remains, before looking up, only to find the club hovering above him.

"Cut the spell!" Weasley shouted.

Harry let go and the club started an unstoppable fall. The troll let out a grunt that could almost have been a whine as the massive object smashed against it's head, then fell down on the bathroom floor, making a hole in it and narrowly missing it's feet. The troll wavered dangerously, blinking once or twice, before falling down on it's back, unconscious.

"Are you ok, Granger?" Harry asked, worried.

"Yeah... I'm fine." She replied unsteadily.

He helped her up and turned to Weasley.

"Here. Take her back to Gryffi—" Before he could continue, the door burst open and McGonagall, Snape and Quirrell burst in.

"What in the world?!" The woman asked, looking at the scene. A trashed bathroom, two Gryffindors and a Slytherin in the same room as an unconscious troll, a broken mirror and more stink than a bodybuilding gym changing room after a 40-hour session.

...hmm.. would there be anyone left in there after a 40 hour session though...? *gets pulled back to the story* Ack! Fine...

“What in the world happened here?!” McGonagall asked, shooting her Super-McGonagall-glare(R)(TM) across the room.

“Erm... well...” Weasley began. Harry was about to step in with a hopefully believable story, to which we would have all liked to see if he would manage to trick three teachers at the same time, when Granger spoke up.

“It was my fault, professor. I... I read about trolls and I thought I could manage to defeat it.”

Harry tried his best not to gawk at her, while Weasley didn’t even bother trying to hide his astonishment. Had Granger just *lied* to a *teacher*??!

“That was a very stupid thing to do, miss Granger.” McGonagall snapped.

“I know... I realized it a bit too late... if it wasn’t for Ron and Potter...”

Snape took that moment to notice him. His face contracted into a sneer.

“Potter, follow me.” He barked, walking out of the office.

Harry gulped and followed the dark-haired teacher down to the dungeons.

“Two months, potter. Two, little, insignificant months in a seven year stay at Hogwarts, if you miraculously manage to stay that long. And you *already* managed to risk your life not *once* but *twice*!” He snapped as they strode at a quick pace, a bit too fast for the small legs of the eleven years old boy who had to jog.

“While the first time, you managed to get a place in the Quidditch team, this time, you will certainly *not* get any kind of favor for your apparently hereditary dare-devil genes.”

Snape pushed the door of the potion class open. Harry gawked in horror.

The place was a mess. Everything was broken, torn, smashed and any other word you can associate with destruction and mayhem. One

of the walls looked like it had exploded; it was completely missing, with only rubble leading to an equally messy hall, toward some stairs heading up.

“Our friend the troll passed through here, as you can probably see.” Snape snapped, a hint of bitterness evident in his voice. “You will help me make this mess viable again. And as it is impossible to do so without magic, you *may* use your wand for this.”

Harry let out a sigh of relief, a mental picture of himself trying to glue a vial back together with super-glue vanishing. Then, another thought came to him.

“Erm... sir, I don’t know any spell to repair things.”

Snape shot him a glare, as if berating him for his lack of knowledge, or for having dared to speak in his mighty presence. Visibly annoyed, Snape took out his wand. For a second, Harry was afraid he was gonna get cursed, but the wand’s target was the smashed-in-half desk beside him.

“*Reparo.*” Snape muttered. Dark green sparks floated out, circled the table and mended it perfectly together, like new. Harry let out an impressed “whoa”, before being roughly shoved into his work by the teacher’s order, to be obeyed immediately under the threat of “Getting enough detentions to be here until you’re twenty”.

The spell was easy enough and soon, Harry found himself with no more broken things to fix. To his horror, however, Snape conjured a mop, a rag and anything else needed to do clean, along with orders to clean the floor up, without magic.

‘This isn’t as fun’, Harry mused with an annoyed grumble. Bad enough that the stones of the floor weren’t equal and that squeezing too hard made the rag risk tearing, some of the unidentifiable stains on the floor were quite resilient. However, near the front door, Harry noticed something odd. A perfectly round, red spot, still wet and easily washed off.

“Blood?” He whispered, low enough so that Snape wouldn’t hear him. He gave a look at the teacher, and only now noticed he was limping. A quick scan back in his memories made him mentally slap himself

for not noticing the odd pace the teacher had been walking at. His left leg's steps had always been quicker than the right.

"Potter, get back to work." Snape hissed.

And Harry did so, his mind heavy with thoughts.

What on earth was happening here?!

Chapter 6: Quidditch

"C'mon, Potter. You've *got* to eat something." Bole said, sitting two seats by Harry's left.

"Can't." The black-haired boy groaned. He felt as if his stomach was protesting against the unfairness of the world, against Hogwarts' heavy foods and against the evil, evil strawberry jam that Blaise was emptying a pot of every morning and that she was currently emptying in his plate.

"You'll need energy, Harry." Draco said, filling up the other boy's plate with eggs straight in the strawberry jam, thus making Harry partly lose his appetite. "The seeker is usually the other team's target."

Harry felt his stomach constrict more and start a general strike, helped by the muscles and pretty much all of his body.

"Thanks Draco, that's really reassuring."

"Shut up, you big baby." Blaise said with a teasing smile. "It's your fault for catching that rememberall."

Harry shot her a glare, as if trying to send his thoughts, which were 'I did it so you wouldn't completely fail in potions'. When he saw it wouldn't work, he let out a sigh.

"Yeah, I just wish Higgs didn't have that accident..." He mumbled. "I'm starting to wonder if it really *was* an accident."

Just two days ago, Higgs had tripped in the stairs going down from the divination tower. He was now laying in the hospital wing, his body unfit for playing. Flint had, oddly enough, looked ecstatic when he had told Harry he would be the one to play.

Trying to calm himself down, he dug into his bag and pulled out *Quidditch through the ages*, a book Granger had passed to him. She had become much friendlier since the troll incident. Her exact words were:

"Well, you came to save me, so you can't be as bad as the rest of them."

To which Draco and Blaise had, of course, resented. However, what she thought wasn't the same thing Weasley did, although she had

also come closer to him up to the point where they were rarely seen apart – apart from the library, that is. Weasley had book-o-phobia.

Harry plunged himself in his reading, trying to block out the noise of everyone eating when the mere thought of doing the same made Harry's stomach protest and demand a syndicate. Why was he so worried? Because the match was in a few hours. Against Gryffindor. His very first Quidditch match, against his house's sworn enemies. He dearly hoped he wouldn't make a fool of himself.

He managed to take a single toast, which tried to get out from the way it went in for, before Flint got up and claimed that breakfast was over for the Quidditch team and that they had to hurry (their butts off) to the Quidditch pitch (under the threat of decapitation).

Never mind that the players probably wouldn't be able to *play* without their heads. Flint's philosophy seemed to turn around the assumption that a head is only a target for budgers/beating bats/broom handles/flying quaffles/rocks/wooden AND/OR metal poles/various thrown objects/physical blows, thus a handicap. This is what happens when people take the game too far, hint to all coaches of the world.

"It's not too dangerous, is it?" Harry asked Derrick, one of the two beaters, as they put on the Slytherin team's green and silver robes.

"Naa, nobody's died yet at Hogwarts. Sure, there's a couple of broken bones, concussions and keepers falling off their broom during their first matches..." Harry noted that the boy's mouth turned into a satisfied smirk at that "But no deaths yet. With Flint leading us though, I think we'll die of exhaustion before the year's done."

Harry couldn't help but agree. He could faintly hear footsteps above them; they probably were under the stands surrounding the oval Quidditch pitch.

Flint walked back from checking the temperature, cleared his throat in a growl and, with a glare, started talking.

“It’s nearly time. This is the most important match of the season. If we lose this one, we’re likely to get only the second place. Of course, the Gryffindors don’t have our team. Bole, Derrick, you two try to take out Wood and that new seeker of theirs. MacDonald I think his name is. No matter, he’s not gonna use it for long.”

Flint had a smirk on his face that clearly indicated he was serious. Harry gulped. Were seekers *that* important? He hoped not, for his own sake.

Flint turned toward the two other chasers, who tensed up.

“Pucey, Montague, watch your passes. Miss a single one and I swear you’ll be wishing you’ve never been born.”

The two chasers nodded. Harry heard gulps coming from them as well. Flint apparently took the game *very* seriously.

“Bletchley, I want you to be at three places at the same time. Budgers, players or flying rocks in your way, I don’t give a damn. Take them in your face for all I care, as long as you can still fly. All you need to worry about is stopping that darn Quaffle.”

The keeper nodded. A black eye from an earlier practice was still present on his face.

Harry had no time to feel sorry for Bletchley because Flint turned his icy eyes on him.

“And you. Potter. If you don’t catch that snitch, I’ll have you running back to whatever hole you came out of. You’ll never step foot in the wizarding world again without fearing my wrath. Catch that snitch like your life depended on in... which in some way, it does.”

Harry nodded slowly and nervously, his eyes wide open. *Please stop looking at me...* he thought weakly.

Thankfully, he did, but only to grab his broom and bark “Why aren’t you all on the pitch yet?! GO!”

Harry idly wondered if the other Quidditch captains were as... fanatic (Obsessed and extremist also come into mind) as Flint.

He could hear hundreds of voices above them, each of them belonging to someone who would watch him in his very first real Quidditch match. His stomach clenched further and promptly signed it's resignation. A louder voice came from outside and 7 names were said. He faintly heard what came next.

"And, unfortunately, here's the Slytherin team."

Harry frowned. Apparently, the commentator didn't like them.

"Flint is evidently getting desperate, digging into the youngest of the school to get his players, although some may thing the youngest in question used his connections to make it there – Sorry professor McGonagall – Here's to Bletchley, Flint, Pucey, Montague, Derrick, Bole and, replacing Higgs, the-boy-who-played-Quidditch-too-early, Potter!"

The stands erupted in jeers, except for the distant Slytherins. Harry let out an angry growl as he walked toward the middle of the field, where the Gryffindors were already, wearing bright red robes. Now he understood why the beaters used red targets.

"I want this match to be fair and clean." Madam Hooch, who was standing in the middle, said once the players were in position around her. Harry noticed her eyes were turned especially at Flint as she said those words. The boy kept silent, but Harry was certain he was thinking something along the lines of "Keep wishing".

"On your brooms!" Hooch barked, to which the players obeyed. Once again, Harry found himself on the comfortable handle of his Nimbus 2000.

The match started with the blowing of Hooch's whistle, to which the players lifted off, and the releasing of the balls. Derrick and one of Weasley's twin brothers took the budgers and proceeded to jab it at each other, while the chasers battled for the quaffle.

"Angelina Johnson, of the Gryffindor team, takes the quaffle!" Said the commentator, obviously a Gryffindor from the tone of voice. "That girl is an excellent chaser, and quite beautiful too—"

“JORDAN!”

“Sorry Professor.”

Harry let another scowl come to his face. Jordan was watched by McGonagall. It was widely known the professor didn't like Slytherins. So, Jordan could probably get away with murder, only getting yelled at once or twice.

“Angelina passes to Alicia Spinnet, who was playing last year in the reserves. Another pass to Johnson and... no, it's Marcus Flint who takes the quaffle and soars like an eagle to the Gryffindor goals! He shoots... excellent block by Oliver Wood, the Gryffindor keeper! Gryffindor takes the quaffle again with Katie Bell, who does a nice dive to escape Flint and... ouch – that had to hurt, a budger in the face – Quaffle to the Slytherins – Adrian Pucey heads toward the goals, but is stopped by Fred or George Weasley, can't be more precise.”

The Gryffindor seeker floated in front of him, looking around the field. Harry blocked out the commentaries and started looking for the Snitch.

“GRYFFINDOR SCORES!”

Harry let out a growl and sped ahead, going lower down toward the field.

“Can yeh move a bit?”

“um... sure” Hermione said, looking up to Hagrid with a tingle of fear. He had always intimidated her a bit.

Weasley and Hermione squeezed together to make room for the huge man (not an easy feat).

“So, did Harry do anythin' yet?” Hagrid asked, sitting down on the benches, making the wood protest and creak.

“Nope. Potter’s just floating there, nobody’s seen the snitch yet.” Weasley said, before turning to Hagrid with a look. “You know him personally?”

“Sure I do! Rescued ‘im from his relatives m’self... with a little help from ‘Imira.”

The red-haired boy gave a look at Hagrid. “Relatives? I thought he lived in some kind of huge manor or something like that.”

“Nope, a crammy little muggle house with people who hate him. Yeh’ll have to ask him ‘bout that later, although he might be a tad bit sore ‘bout it.”

“Slytherin retakes the Quaffle,” Jordan said. “Chaser Pucey dodges both budgers, both Weasleys and Bell, and heads for the—wait a second—Is that the snitch?!”

At the magic word, both Harry and the Gryffindor seeker, a hunchbacked third year boy who looked like he was afraid his broom would throw him off, turned around and looked at Pucey, who had dropped the Quaffle, which Flint caught while no one was looking or caring. Harry sped forward, pushing his broom as fast as he could.

Hermione squeaked in annoyance.

“I don’t know for who to root!!” She moaned.

Weasley didn’t have the same attitude, however, as he yelled “CRASH DEAD, POTTER!!”

“GO HARRY!!!!!!” Blaise and Draco shouted at the same time, accidentally spilling their Every flavor beans all over Crabbe and Goyle, who scowled in annoyance.

Harry grinned as he spotted his three friends. To help him, Derrick shot a budger at the other seeker, who was hit in the stomach and dropped the two meters left to the ground, his broom crashing like a javelin few meters ahead. Harry's grin grew wider. Now all he needed was to catch the—

To his annoyance, however, Hooch whistled a time-out for Gryffindor.

"She can't do that, can she?!" Harry yelled at Flint, who had used the distraction to score three times, bringing the score to 30-10 Slytherin.

"Nope, she can't, but none of the other houses will complain." The Slytherin captain said with a scowl, looking at the Gryffindors turning around their seeker, in a matter much like, Harry found, a pack of vultures.

The game started again two minutes later, when the seeker got back on his feet, apparently fine, and lifted off, his broom looking more dirtied than damaged.

'Too bad.' Harry thought.

The Slytherin team was angry. Very angry. It meant bad news for the other team. Bad news as in 'Headache, coming right up!' news or 'Oh, sorry, was that your head?' and 'Hope you got life insurance' news. An angry Slytherin team is *not* a good sight.

Ten minutes, later, the Gryffindors had scored once because of the third penalty shot they received after Bole accidentally mistook a head for a budger, after Flint accidentally rammed into Wood, the keeper, not the forest, and after Pucey slipped and accidentally punched the Gryffindor seeker in the face.

Nope, it wasn't pretty.

After two budgers nearly turned him into the-boy-who-had-a-pancake-head, Harry spotted the Snitch, hovering just behind the Gryffindor seeker. He lowered himself on his broom to make it go forward...

...nothing.

“Ehh??!” He gave an odd look at the broom. It was completely unresponsive, just hovering there above everyone. Anytime now, the seeker would turn around and see the snitch...

However, the snitch went away from the seeker and disappeared from Harry’s sight. He didn’t have the time to actually feel any relief that his broom suddenly gave a strong jerk, followed by another, and a third.

“What in the name of Slytherin?!” Bole hissed, seeing Harry’s broom act like a wild rodeo horse to who a Barney torture was about to be induced – Totally out of it’s mind.

“Potter’s doing a good impression of one of those crazy wild west Yankees, but I don’t see why he’d... wait, Potter’s broom is out of control?!”

‘Good deduction, Sherlock!!’ He mentally hissed, gripping the broom handle harder and clamping his knees around the wooden shaft. Everyone was looking at him now, except Flint, who was using this time to score five times against Gryffindor while nobody was watching or caring.

Suddenly, the broom gave a furious jerk and Harry’s hands lost their hold. To his great horror, he found himself hanging upside-down from his broom, only held by his legs. And even then, his hold was slipping fast. He clenched his hands on the handle just as the wooden handle slipped, leaving him precariously hanging from his hands.

“Watch your shrieking! I don’t wanna become deaf!!” Draco snapped, his eyes not once leaving Harry.

Blaise gave him an apologetic look.

“Could you turn off the yells, just a bit, Hermione?” Ron mumbled.

Hermione gave him a glare and snapped "Excuse me, but Harry's about to try skydiving without parachute if things keep up like this!"

"What's a parachoot?"

"Never mind."

Bole and Derrick flew up to help him, but the broom gave another jerk and flew higher, shaking Harry's body like a twice re-sewed rag doll. He felt his hands go moist and his grip weaken as the two beaters abandoned trying to reach him, just circling below him to try and catch him, along with the three Gryffindor chasers and Pucey. Montague was just staring at him from a distance away while Flint was, of course, being busy scoring another unnoticed goal.

Harry let out a colorful curse that he had once heard Mrs Zabini mutter over the daily prophet, looking around, especially at the teachers. Why weren't any of them trying to help him?!

Draco frowned as the broom flew higher. Beside him, Blaise gave a similar growl, before turning to Millicent and yanking the binoculars from her pudgy hands, pointing them toward Harry. The blonde boy did the same, stealing Pansy's. Both, at once, noticed where Harry was looking. Both pointed their binoculars at the teachers' stands... but neither saw the same thing.

'What on earth is Quirrell doing?!' Draco thought, noticing that the teacher looked unnaturally sure of himself.

It was then Harry noticed Snape staring at him, his mouth moving in a muttered incantation. Was he the one doing this? But why? In his surprise, he didn't notice the broom jerk violently and throw him off, until he was falling, a fact that he only registered a second later when the wind started to pick up and the broom looked like it was fleeing away.

Bzzzzzzzt

A familiar buzzing came to his ears. In a free-fall, nearly fifteen foot above anyone else, and ninety above the ground, he found it. Falling alongside him, the golden snitch was just a foot away.

And what did he do? Anything a good Slytherin would. He jumped on the occasion.

Just as the Gryffindor chaser called Johnson caught him, he lifted his fist in the air, in which the golden snitch was stuck, trying to escape his grip.

"I caught the snitch!" He bellowed. A second later, the Slytherins stands erupted into deafening screams, while the others let out angry or disappointed groans.

Draco, Vincent and Gregory whooped loudly, while Blaise, Pansy and Millicent did nothing but shriek and scream, which soon caused the three boys to stop yelling and cover their ears.

"Why do they have to sound like such Banshees?!" Draco wondered out loud. Fortunately for him, none of them heard.

"Show your house some loyalty, Hermione."

"Ron, it's his first match! Show some concern!" She replied, giving him a glare from her applauds. "And it's just a game, after all."

Ron gave her a stunned, disbelieving look and proceeded to preach to silent ears the greatness of Quidditch while Hagrid chuckled in amusement.

"Slytherin wins, 160 to... what?!?! Slytherin wins, 260 to 10??! How in the world did THAT happen?!"

Harry was dropped on Bole's broom by a frustrated Johnson, while Wood turned to the hoops poles and started whacking his head on them in a irate, undignified way.

“Great job, Potter.” Flint said, holding the quaffle under his arm. “Excellent idea to take everyone’s attentions on yourself. It let me score ten times... but did you have to make it look so real?”

“Of course I had to...” He took up the act, grinning falsely as his Nimbus 2000 was returned by Pucey. “How else would the Gryffindor team have believed me? Now we’re first and staying there!”

Much congratulatory slaps in the back followed his lie. Harry managed to keep his smile until he was alone, when it completely vanished as his mind started another game of “Reel the thoughts”.

That night, the Slytherin common room was a festive place, while anywhere else looked like something had died – which their hope for victory sort of did. Harry only partly participated, even though he was the boy-in-the-spotlight. His mind was busy elsewhere, a large, crooked-nosed elsewhere.

‘Did Snape really try to kill me? But why would he?’

‘Snape hates yeh? Shoul’a known. Just the kinda guy teh hold grudges, that man’

‘Hagrid told me he had a grudge on me... but what did I do?’

“Potter.” Flint’s bark pulled him out of his thoughts like a slap in the face. “The way you manipulated the enemy team into believing you were out of control, the way you masterfully played along up to falling and revealing the snitch you caught at the best possible moment, you’ve been unanimously voted to be promoted.”

By now, the entire common room was silent. Everyone was looking at them. Flint pulled out a neatly folded green and silver uniform on which the words “Slytherin Seeker” were clearly visible.

“Congratulations, Potter. You’re the official seeker now.”

Harry’s grin nearly broke his ears to pieces, something the cheers that flooded the room – and probably the entire castle – a second later actually managed.

Followed this scene a party that lasted until the wee hours of the morning. In the great hall, every teacher was awake, drinking coffee – even the Tea-lady McGonagall – and glaring daggers at a smirking Snape.

“You should tell them to go to sleep.” McGonagall snapped, rubbing her eyes sleepily.

Snape nodded. “I should.” But didn’t move. He was the only one apparently awake.

“Won’t you?” Sprout asked.

“Of course, in a couple of hours.” He answered with a straight face.

Everyone sighed in annoyance.

However, not every Slytherin were as happy as he is. Two of them in particular, one of them, called Terence Higgs, was glaring sabers, tridents and spears at Harry in the common room.

As for the other...

Chapter 7: Christmas surprises

November came and went with no more giant three-headed dogs, injured teachers, Trolls, falling rememberalls, or problems, outside of potions and Quidditch, in which both Snape and Flint were becoming more aggressive. While the teacher had lowered a bit his comments and points-removal for a week after the match, the effort was apparently too much to maintain.

Snow had started falling, and not just a bit. The layer covering the ground was thick enough to allow the Weasley twins to create enchanted snowballs that chased after Quirrell's turban for a whole day until there was none left. By then, the purple piece of cloth was waterlogged and stunk even more than usual. The air had become so cold Hedwig categorically refused to go out for mail delivery at the Zabinis'. Although it could very well be that she would have to fly a looong way.

"Mom and dad are probably in Italy by now, visiting our family there." Blaise told Harry as they signed their names on the list of those who stayed.

"Why can't we got to Draco's place already?" Harry asked.

"It's not a good idea." Was all the platinum-haired boy replied. Of the three of them, he was the only one leaving home for the winter, along with Crabbe and Goyle. "Your name is liked by most, not all."

But Draco wouldn't say what he had meant by that.

On the potion class side, the project was finished. Harry was stunned; he had managed to keep his sanity. Although it probably was because Hermione had become much more supportable ever since the Troll attacked her. Snape had taken the doses of skele-grow, said he'd test them during the winter break. Harry dearly hoped the students remaining here wouldn't be the guinea pigs. The class ended soon after that.

"Sorry, make way! Goin' through!" the familiar voice of Hagrid came, most of him hidden by an extremely large Christmas tree with legs, strolling outside the exit of the dungeons.

“Need any help with that?” Harry asked, dearly hoping that the answer would be negative. Somehow, he couldn’t picture himself holding a twenty foot tall tree like Hagrid was doing. He started to wonder why on earth he had asked.

“No need, Harry.” The man replied and Harry mentally sighed in relief. “I can handle this thin’ by m’self. Thanks fer the offer though.”

“Probably wanted to jinx it.” Weasley muttered, as he and Hermione walked by, the girl giving him a rough hit on the shoulder with an exasperated sound.

“Jealous, Weasley?” Draco said with his trademark ‘I am superior, bow to me, lowly mortal’ smirk. “Maybe you should ask, too, you might even become the groundkeeper when he’s retired. You’d probably make more money than your family’s ever had, too! Do you know what a knut is?” The last line was said in such a level of taunting that my patented Taunt-o-meter – Invented alongside the sarcasm-o-meter, which breaks practically every time I write – ran off in fear.

Weasley dropped his bag and promptly charged at Draco, grabbing him by the collar. Before it could get any worse, Snape walked through the same way they had gone from, glaring angrily at Weasley.

“What’s the meaning of this?!”

“Malfoy provoked him, professor.” Hermione said, trying to pull Weasley off Draco. Even though he had let go, the girl was much smaller than him and had evident trouble at it.

“Heard it m’self, professor.” Hagrid said. Harry was sure there was a ‘I’m gonna get him into trouble’ look in his eyes. He knew Hagrid didn’t like Draco one bit.

“Nevertheless... Fighting is not allowed in the halls, Weasley. Five points from Gryffindor. Now move along.” The tone of his voice turned from sadistically cheerful to super instant-tooth-decay sweet, to a ‘obey me or die’ bark. He turned toward Draco, Blaise and Harry, but especially the last two.

“That goes for you three as well.”

And he walked away, his cape blowing like bat wings behind him. Harry pulled his tongue at the teacher, then turned toward Blaise as they started walking.

“One day, I’m gonna sabotage my potion and arrange it to blow up in his face.”

“When you do that, count me in.” Blaise said flatly as they followed Hagrid to the great hall.

Even Hogwarts was getting into a festive mood. The great hall was richly decorated with mistletoes hanging from the roof, ready to trap unknowing victims with smoochy wet surprises. Eleven enormous Christmas trees were installed around the room, with Flitwick and McGonagall busy decorating them with magically created ornaments.

“Good, it’s the last one.” McGonagall said, looking at Hagrid. “Put it up behind the head table, Hagrid.”

The man nodded and carried the final tree where directed. The five students separated, heading for their respective tables.

“How much time’s left?” Blaise asked Draco.

“One day. Can’t say I’m unhappy to go, but I just wish you two could come along with us.”

He indicated at Crabbe and Goyle, who choose that moment to walk in with Pansy and Millicent, the rest of the first year Slytherins.

“You still haven’t said why I cant come with you.”

“I will.” Draco said. “One day, maybe.”

As Harry soon discovered, he and Blaise were some of the very few students to have decided to stay. Among them were, unfortunately, the Weasley army/invasion force/clan. As predictable, without Hermione to scare him off, little Weasley, the worst of the lot, became unsupportable.

"It's a real pain *all* the Slytherins couldn't go away, though..." He said loudly, wanting them to hear, under his twin brothers' laughs and the stern eye of the prefect one. An invasion, a plague of red-heads, that's what it was.

"It's a real pain Weasley can't drop down dead." Blaise said, just as loudly, in the same tone.

Harry nodded. "Yeah, it would make our vacation perfect. Maybe we'd better ask Santa for an 'instant Weasley eviction kit', if we're lucky, we won't have to see his freckled face 'till next year, who knows, maybe even next school year."

Little Weasley's eyes turned into a furious glare.

"Shut up, Potter."

"Make me, *ickle Ronniekins*." He said, having heard of the twins' 'affectionate' name for Weasley, probably along with the entire school, when they had yelled it during a dinner.

Weasley's ears turned red enough to make the air stop and wait for the green as the twins howled in laughter. The prefect one, sensing a fight coming, pulled his little brother away, glaring at the twins who faked their deaths dramatically.

The following days passed as quickly as if time had decided to enter the formula 1 race on the fastest track on earth; before they knew it, it was...

"WAKE UP, HARRY! ITS CHRISTMAS!!"

Thank you Blaise, couldn't have said it better myself.

"Whuuuaa?"

This is what Harry sounds like when he's been woken up by an hyperactive girl rushing into his dorm room and jumping on his bed. Warn "Witch weekly", they'll jump on it. The story, I mean. Not Harry. Well... maybe both.

“Christ-MAS!” She repeated loudly in his ear, accentuating the final sound with a slight bounce the officially tore Harry from the blissful land of sleep and into the painful land of the ‘I got woken up by a hyper Blaise’ living.

Harry wasn’t happy. His head was pounding, as if his brain was knocking on the side of his skull in a move of protestation against early-risers everywhere. To make things worse, she ripped the dark green curtains open, letting the light coming from the small window pour directly into his eyes, making him groan and roll up his pillow over his face.

“Awright, I’m up...” He mumbled, sounding more like ‘I give up’.

“No you’re not! Ok, fine, I’ll take all your presents!”

“Your—My Presents?” That started Harry’s engine faster than a team of 50 racing mechanics can put up a bicycle chain. “I got presents?”

“Unless the three packages that are in the middle of your dorms spontaneously spawned themselves from thin air, or they’re just stuff your dorm mates forgot lying there, at the base of your bed with “To Harry Potter” on the—”

“Alright, I get it...” He groaned, interrupting her rant. While Blaise could not normally be considered a calm girl, if given anything to excite her further, she easily became by far worse than a rampaging, panicked rodeo horse tied up in strongest point of a cyclone with earphones forcing it to listen to “the thirties’ greatest hits”.

(A/N: The author would like to apologize to anyone who actually *likes* thirties’ songs. I’m sorry for you. *Gets whacked by nameless old people*)

He quickly sat up in his bed, thankful for the fact that, as both he and Blaise decided, they both slept in their night robes to prevent one of the two barging in from seeing more than he/she should. He checked at the foot of his bed; sure enough, three packages were already there. One of them was under inspection by Blaise’s powerful and very precise detection system: shaking the box to hear what’s inside.

“Would you mind shutting that damned light down?! Some snakes are trying to sleep here!” Nemesis hissed. Fortunately, Blaise was currently too busy to spot the boy glare at the black, green and red striped snake hiding under the covers.

Blaise gave a forceful shake to the box, turning Harry’s attention toward her.

“Oi, it could be fragile!!” Harry protested, getting up.

She frowned. “It sounds like clothes.” She said.

Harry shrugged and pointed at Dudley’s overlarge ‘Elephant skin’ clothes, laying on the floor beside his bed in a way only a preteen boy can, unless it’s a very disorganized teen (A/N *cough, cough*) or an even worse adult.

“Anything but those are appreciated.” He said with a slight grin.

Blaise smirked. “I know what to give you next birthday.”

“Anything better would be even *more* appreciated.” He added.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” She replied, before her attention went back to the box. “I really wonder what it is though... who knows, maybe it’s one from of your *fangirls*.” She accentuated the last word with a ‘little sister’ taunting tone.

He gave her a playful glare as he tore the package from her hands, looking at it over.

“There’s no ‘from’... whoever sent this doesn’t want me to know.”

“Hmm... a really *embarrassed* fangirl.”

After a glare at hell’s ‘blazing devil’, he tore the package open, carelessly leaving the bright blue paper on the ground, and ripped the top of the box like a tornado rips a house’s roof.

“...weird.” Was the answer. It was some kind of cloak. Under his touch, it felt like a mix of silk and water, as odd as trying to imagine both is. Not wet silk, more like a feeling of the softness of silk with the smoothness and shapelessness of water. It was dark brown in color,

but anywhere where the sun hit it glowed in an unusual, magical silvery light.

“That... is one... cool cloak.” Blaise said, taking it in her hands. That’s when they both noticed something special about that cloak, mainly when Blaise’s hands under the cloak disappeared. She shrieked in surprise and let it go on the floor, where it covered the aforementioned paper and making it disappear.

“It’s some kind of... invisibility cloak...” Harry mumbled, taking it in his hands. He testily put it on his head. Though he could see from inside, it became obvious that Blaise couldn’t see him.

“Wicked.” Blaise gasped with a wide grin. “Do you have any idea how much trouble we can put Weasley into with that?”

“Figures that it’s the first thing you think about, Blaise.” He said with a grin as he removed the cloak and folded it up, putting it on his bed.

“It’s a gift.” She said, passing her hand through her hair in a Prima-Donna fashion, before looking in the box. “There’s a note there... ‘This used to belong to your father, Use it well’. That’s all it says.”

“My father’s? Is the writing familiar?” Harry asked, looking in awe at the cloak at his side.

“Nope.” Blaise showed him the note, in simple dark blue ink.

“Well, whoever sent us that likes blue.” Harry said, before looking at his other presents.

Mrs Zabini sent him a magical camera with a photo album, claiming that ‘your years at Hogwarts are usually the best thing in a wizard’s memory.’. Harry and Blaise spent a good ten minutes clowning in front of the camera, then another ten at laughing at their pictures clowning off.

Hagrid sent him a hand-made flute that let out the sound of an owl’s hoot when he blew in it. Blaise tried as well and it made a glass-shattering squeak.

“Blaise, don’t even try.” Harry said, trying to stop his ears from ringing.

"I won't." Blaise said, in the same situation. "I should have known, I've never been able to play a single note on anything."

To Harry's great surprise, however, Hermione also sent him something. A bag of sweets, including chocolate frogs, Bertie Blott's beans – which Blaise immediately nicked a box of – and pumpkin pasties.

"Hmm... it looks like you and her are becoming good friends... oh, there's a note... 'Merry Christmas, Love, Hermione.'" She grinned like a Cheshire cat and started shouting in a little out of key sing-song "Harry Lo~oves Her~mie!"

"DO NOT!!" He retorted, his cheeks burning up in embarrassment.

"Do too! You're blushing!"

"Am not!" He replied, looking away sheepishly.

For the rest of the morning, the conversation dropped to the almighty level of immaturity that is 'Am not, are too'. For once in his life, Harry Potter behaved like a normal child, then like a normal teen when his stomach demanded food loudly enough for the 'Weasley invasion force' to run for cover screaming "EARTHQUAKE!!".

...ok, maybe I'm exaggerating a *little*.

They walked into the great hall to find Weasley's twin brothers prancing around, wearing two nearly identical jumpers that bore the letters F and G, while the prefect glared at them angrily, a wearing a similar jumper with, of course, his shining, polished, 'Don't look at me too long if you don't want to become blind', 'I made Draco's hair jealous' prefect badge pinned on top.

However, the little Weasley wasn't there.

"You two should take example on your little brother!" Weasley 'I eat a rulebook each breakfast' the prefect scolded them.

"Yeah right, and be stuck in the library all winter?" The twin wearing the shirt in G said.

“I’d have expected that from his girlfriend, Granger (At which Harry let out a snort), but not him, Gred.”

“Definitely strange, Forge. Maybe we oughta check out what Ickile Ronniekins is up to?”

“Maybe we should too, Harry...” Blaise said, looking at her side where Harry was. Keyword: was. “Harry? Where did he go?”

“Nicholas Flamel... there’s got to be at least *one* bloody thing about this guy...”

Harry mentally congratulated himself for bringing his new invisibility cloak in his pocket – Never mind that an object this big shouldn’t be able to fit in a normal, albeit large, muggle jean pocket, this is the wizarding world after all. Weasley hadn’t spotted him at all, too busy in his apparently all important research. Harry noted that the boy wore a jumper much like his brothers’, in a horrible maroon color with a golden R on it.

The boy pulled out a book called ‘*Famous aurors of the past, present but not future, since we don’t know if they’ll be famous yet*’ – Harry made a mental note to ask Blaise if every wizarding book had names this silly – opened it at the index and started looking around.

“...nope, no Nicholas Flamel there... man, if I don’t find anything, Hermione’s gonna have my head...”

“Working for Hermione now?” Harry said, removing the cloak quickly while Ron wasn’t looking and hiding it back in his pocket. He jumped and sat on a table, both of his hands going behind his back.

The red-haired boy whirled around, dropping the book in shock. Harry put on an unreadable, unnerving smile.

“What on earth are *you* doing here, Potter?”

“Oh, I have as much right to be in this library as you, Weasley. I’m surprised, really, to find *you* here though. It’s Christmas, your whole family’s here, there’s dinner in the great hall, and you’re here, by

yourself, reading some books about famous wizards. Correct me if I'm wrong, but that's Hermione's idea of fun, not yours."

The boy didn't answer, glaring at Harry like he was an unwelcome snake, which, in some way, he was.

"From what I heard, I can tell you're here doing something for her... She's gone to see her parents, right? Thought so." He said without waiting a reply.

"What's it to you?"

Harry shrugged nonchalantly and jumped off the table, doing two steps toward the other boy before stopping.

"Like it or not, Hermione is my friend too." He said, crossing his arms. "If you're doing something for her, something with which I might be able to help, I want in. Unless it's something very personal that has to do with what your brothers are claiming."

"Now what are those bloody buggers saying now?!" Weasley hissed, earning himself a warning look from madam Pince, the librarian.

"Nothing much, except that you and Hermione are going out."

Weasley's fists clenched, his ears reddened to make his hair jealous and his eyes oozed out with fury.

"Why... those..."

Harry shrugged. "So, what did Hermione ask you to do? Something about a Nicholas Flamel?"

Weasley's anger lowered a bit, but evident disgust came to his face. Harry perfectly understood the dilemma before him.

Do it by himself and risk not finding a thing, thus getting Hermione's wrath on him – a fate none would wish for – or ask a Slytherin for help. And Harry didn't care. Whatever the reason, if Hermione had *him* do special research during the winter break and he agreed, it must be that this thing was pretty darn important. So, he'd just look it up personally with his cloak.

“Fine.” Weasley replied, before launching himself into a story.

“So you know about Fluffy, and Hagrid said that whatever’s in there is between Dumbledore and Flamel, eh?”

Weasley nodded. “After the Quidditch match.”

“Hmm. ‘kay, I’ll get Blaise and we’ll help you.”

“Wh-What?!” He hissed in surprise. “Why get *her* to help us? *You’re* already bad enough!”

Harry gave him a look and shrugged. “At three, we’ll be much faster. And anyways, she might already know. Plus, Blaise is Hermione’s friend too.”

Weasley gave him a withering glare, realizing he’s been cornered.

“No way.”

“Blaiiise!!” Harry whined at her sharp and ‘Titanium wall’ solid answer.

“I am *not* losing a second of my winter vacations scooped up in the library! No way, mai, never, not this century OR the next fifteen!”

Her voice echoed between the walls of the completely empty common room. While, normally, the gloomy atmosphere and dim light was ignored by everyone because of the many interesting things – threats, alliances, revenges, blackmail and others – going on, when it was only two people, the room looked downright creepy. The intense cold outside chilled the air inside, but made it a very enjoyable experience to be rolled up in a warm blanket, laying down on one of the comfy couches while roasting whatever they wanted – From the traditional marshmallows to chocolate frogs (Which melted while pitifully trying to get off the stick), idea of Blaise of course – as they were doing now.

“But Blaise, of all people, *Weasley’s* looking around in the library to find information on Flamel. Don’t you think it should be important?”

Plus, Hagrid said it had something to do with whatever Fluffy's hiding."

"Why should we care?"

"Don't you want to know what could be important enough to make Dumbledore let a giant three-headed dog in the school?"

Blaise looked thoughtful at that.

"Hmm... maybe, but I *still* don't want to go to the library."

Harry crossed his arms and looked away. "Fine then, Weasley and I won't tell you what we find."

"I don't care." She said, her tone saying something all different.

"..." For a moment, both were silent. The only noise of the common room was the crackling of the fire and their slow, rhythmic breathing. Harry's face started to grin.

"Oh, fine." She let out in a sigh. "But we'll go in two days, I want to enjoy tomorrow, my last *true* day of vacation."

'I win.' He thought, grinning. Her curiosity got the better of her, just like he had wanted.

Later that night, Harry lay in his bed, eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling. He wasn't able to close his eyes once. What could be important enough to make someone risk stealing in a top security vault in Gringotts, to cause Dumbledore to hide the object in question here, at Hogwarts, by a large, dangerous three-headed dog – Called Fluffy, another scary detail – but a very powerful object?

He couldn't stop his curiosity. It was burning him with coals and red metal, and killing at least a dozen cat every second. He let out another sigh.

"Will you go to sleep already?!" Nemesis hissed, his head popping out of the covers to stare into Harry's.

“Can’t.”

“Then if you can’t sleep, do something useful! Go out there and get busy on that Flannel dude!”

“It’s Flamel.” Harry corrected.

“Flannel, Flamer, where’s the difference. Just go and let me sleep.”

“I knew you had a second motive.” Harry said, getting up.

“I always do.” The snake replied, sneaking back into the warm sheets. Harry chuckled.

Nobody noticed him getting inside the library. Fortunately, the doors weren’t locked and Pince was sound asleep in her room/office, snoring louder than a truck engine. Hidden under his invisibility cloak, he headed straight to the restricted section.

If there was ever one room creepier than the Slytherin common room and the Potions classroom, it was the restricted section. He had heard from older Slytherins that the books in here talked about dark arts or other illegal acts. Mainly since those Slytherins sometimes sneaked some books out and gave them to those who weren’t allowed as pay for favors or simply for a handful of Gallions.

Silently, making sure to stay as far as possible from the “Loud books” section, he walked around, checking the rows.

“Famous wizards...” He whispered triumphantly and started digging around.

“Alchemists... probably not. Arithmancers, don’t think so.”

“Dark lords, seriously doubt it. Dark wizards, even more.”

He stayed up until his eyes tried to shut the blinds commonly known as eyelids. Through all his search, he had picked three books, transfiguring pieces of wood into rather odd books that he clearly wished Pince wouldn’t check – While the cover was very resembling, the inside was a thick piece of wood.

He walked out again, sleepily passing by a discarded book cart. Without him knowing, one of the folds of his cape touched one of the books, causing it to fall and open on the floor...

And, through a set of unbelievable PCD (Plot Convenience Device), it just *happened* to be a loud one.

The yell it shot out was nearly enough to make him deaf; it was far worse than Crabbe and Goyle trying to sing, or Blaise playing in his flute. It sounded like the book was being tortured in the most painful *physical* way, since there was no voices behind of a children TV program.

Harry cursed, put out his lamp and ran out, leaving no proof of his presence. Better not close the book, it may still pass for an accident if he left it like that. He came out of the restricted section just in time to see Filch and Pince walk in, leaving him the way out free.

Grinning like a Cheshire cat, he silently stalked down the empty halls, heading back to the Slytherin common room...

"You asked me to get you directly if one of the students tried to sneak into the library, well one just did. The restricted section, more precisely."

Harry hissed in anger at Filch's voice. He couldn't be found out yet, could he? Damn that caretaker for knowing all the secret passages!

The next voice he heard made his blood chill at the possible implications.

"The restricted section? That student couldn't have gone very far."

It was Snape.

The two of them appeared in front of him from the spinning stairway leading down, just where he had been going to. With an angry hiss, he backed away. The two men were completely blocking the way, and Mrs Norris was smelling the air in a way he definitely didn't like.

He was unfortunately forced into backing off toward the library again. Finally, the hall came to a crossing. He quickly and silently went another way...

...only to find himself in the same hallway as madam Pince. Snape and Filch noticed her and turned his way as well.

'Well that's just great.' He thought. 'Stuck between the caretaker of hell and his... cat, hell's top torturer and it's sadistic librarian.' He mentally forbid himself from calling Mrs Norris Filch's wife, even though it was the general rumor.

(A/N: Ewww)

"Any luck?" Snape asked Pince.

The woman shook her head. "None, but I noticed a couple of books were missing, and have been replaced by poorly transfigured copies."

She showed them the wooden books. Snape started walking faster. Harry nervously hid in the tiny space inside a slightly open doorway, hoping he wouldn't get caught.

...wait, read above.

...Slightly open doorway?

He gave a look through the opening behind him while Snape sneered at the job, claiming it probably was a first year's job. The room behind was dark and apparently large enough for him to hide. Hoping the door was well oiled, he pushed it open, making sure Snape wasn't looking at him. Fortunately, he seemed well interested by the book.

"Very sloppy. None of my Slytherins would do a poor job such as this."

'Geez, how flattering.' Harry thought as he pushed the door open. Mrs Norris shot him a look, but didn't move. He pushed it just wide enough to allow him to sneak in.

"You are of course aware of who there is in the school, Snape." Pince started as he managed to slip through without being noticed. "Two of your Slytherins are first years, while the only one from any other house is little Weasley. And sneaking around the restricted section in the middle of the night is clearly Slytherin behavior."

Snape frowned, but didn't answer. Instead, he barked: "Keep looking, we'll find him." and they separated, leaving Harry to shut the door with a relieved sigh.

Harry's alarms shot up, however, when he noticed what Snape had said.

"We'll find *him*."

Could he know?

Naa. How could he have guessed?

Harry started exploring the room he had stumbled into. It was apparently a disused classroom, virtually empty except for one object, a tall mirror over which was written "Erised stra ehru oyt ube cafru oyt on wohsi"

"What kind of weird language is that..." Harry wondered, before looking in the mirror.

He saw himself in the mirror, wearing his dark green night robe, his messy jet black hair in 'bed mode', sticking in every direction like some kind of tribute to hurricane-torn palm trees. That much was normal. However, when he was about to look away, he noticed something appearing. Or rather, two people.

One of them, a tall man with glasses, brown eyes and hair just as messy as his, if not more, was smiling, his hand passed around the shoulders of the second figure. A red-head woman with happily glittering green eyes.

...*his* eyes.

"Mom?" He whispered, reaching forward to touch the woman.
"Dad...?"

The Harry in the picture was smiling happily and snuggled himself closer to both of his parents. The real Harry's heart teared up at the image.

'This could have been me...' he thought.

Tears were now escaping his eyes. He pulled a chair closer and sat down on it to gaze at the mirror, something he did during the whole night.

"Where were you?!?" Blaise bellowed at his return the next morning. "Snape woke me up at an ungodly hour to ask me where you were!!"

"Sorry, but I found something you *have* to see." Was his only reply as he pulled her by the arm out of the Slytherin common room, the girl protesting and ignored all the way.

"You pulled me all the way out here just to see a dumb old dusty mirror?!"

"shh! I don't think we're supposed to be here!" Harry warned, before turning to the mirror. It hadn't moved a single bit, which was a good thing. You never know with magical objects...

But as he had expected, the two silent, smiling figures in the mirror re-appeared. With a grin, he walked up to the mirror.

"You see them?" He asked Blaise, pointing at his parents.

Blaise's eyes grew wide open in surprise.

"That's my mom, a—" "What are you talking about? I see myself, wearing all kind of wicked jewelry... and I'm a beautiful adult, wearing one of those spiffy auror robes!"

Harry gave her an odd look and turned back to the mirror. His parents were still there, smiling at him in the same, gentle way as before. But no Blaise in jewels and auror robes.

Disturbed, Harry pulled a protesting Blaise away – "What's with you and pulling me around?!" – heading for the great hall, intent on having at least a bite of breakfast. As he told his intentions, the girl stopped protesting. The puller became the pulled.

The day passed quickly as the two of them spent most of the day scooped up in the library, searching anything with the name Nicholas Flamel, and learning 'the 1001 ways to whine and/or complain' by Blaise Zabini.

While Blaise and Harry worked together, Ron seemed to avoid them like the plague, searching a whole three rows away from them.

"You should be grateful we're helping, you, Weasley." Blaise said. "I can think of many things I'd rather be doing right now than this."

To which the red-haired boy didn't answer, his nose stuck deeply inside an upside-down copy of '*Wand envy and you*'. Harry could barely stifle his laughs when Weasley realized what he had been reading, and never got in the grownup section again.

He had waited a long time that night, lying in his bed, fighting sleep with whatever weapons he could find – Ranging from Quidditch strategies to classes, anything *but* History of magic, which was Sleep's favorite weapon. When he was fairly certain Blaise wasn't going to spot and stop him, he got up, slipped his invisibility cloak over his head and walked out as silently as he could. One of the rules for sneaking around; always be silent, even when you're in a 'safe' place.

He stalked down the halls, barely avoiding a madly cackling Peeves charging through with two armfuls of neon pink water balloons and Mrs Norris who mewed too loudly for his taste after smelling the air for a while. Finally, thankfully without any rolling boulders or arrow-slit infested walls – You never know at Hogwarts... – he found himself inside his destination, the mirror room. He removed his invisibility cloak and sat down on the chair in front of the mirror.

"Here again, Harry?" Came a voice. A familiar voice he remembered from his first day at Hogwarts.

“Professor Dumbledore!” He gasped. The worst had happened. The *headmaster* of the school had found him. The old man was just behind him, sitting on a desk.

“It appears being invisible blinds you.”

Used to Snape being his boss, millions of terrible, painful and bloody scenarios came to his mind, most of which crashed in a disordered heap on the mental ground of his head when he saw the blue-eyed old man was smiling, a true, genuine, unforced smile.

“I see that you, like so many before you, have found the wonders of the mirror of Erised.”

“I didn’t know it was called like that...”

“Do you understand what it does?”

“It shows me my parents...”

“And it shows your friend Blaise as a powerful, beautiful auror like her mother.”

“How do you know?” Harry almost feared the answer. Some older students of Slytherin said he had the ability to read minds. If that was true, then it would be exceedingly hard to keep anything from him.

“Unlike you, I don’t need a cloak to become invisible.”

Oh. That’s almost as bad.

“And do you understand what it does now?”

Harry thought for a moment, then shook his head.

“Allow me to explain. The happiest man on earth would see only himself in the mirror, as he is. Does that help you?”

Harry thought for a few seconds, then tried an answer. “It... shows us what we want to see?”

“Yes an no,” replied Dumbledore. “it shows us nothing else than our heart’s greatest desire, what our heart aches for. You have never seen your parents, you suddenly have them before you. Blaise Zabini,

who thinks the world of her mother, suddenly sees herself an almost exact copy of her, and rich, to boot. But this mirror cannot give you knowledge or truth. Many men perished or became mad by looking at this mirror, because they didn't know if what they saw was truth, or even possible. Tomorrow, this mirror will be moved, and I must ask you not to try to find it again. But if you ever happen to stumble on it again, you will know about its dangers. It's not good to live in your dreams and forget to live in the real world, remember this. And now, put that cloak back on and got to sleep."

(A/N: The author would like to apologize for this extremely long quote. There was no other way.)

Harry got back up, a little tiredly by all that happened. He now understood why Dumbledore was liked so much; anyone else would have probably just taken his cloak away and locked him back up in the Slytherin common room with a good detention. A question came to his mind, though. What could such a powerful man want?

"Sir? May I ask you something?"

"You just did, but you can ask another one."

Harry mentally groaned as the old man's eyes twinkled playfully. That joke was seriously overused.

(A/N: The author would like to apologize for giving a good number his readers a Serious Sirius bad joke overload. I know I suffered from one.)

"What do you see when you look in the mirror?"

"Me? I see myself holding a good pair of wool socks."

...and a wide-eyed Harry understood why many called him crazy.

"We never have enough socks. Christmas just went by and I didn't get a single pair. Everyone seems stuck on giving me books."

When he got back into his bed, Harry stayed up for quite a while, wondering if Dumbledore had told him the truth. The greatest desire of Dumbledore's heart, his deepest need: A pair of wool socks?

'Maybe he didn't want to answer.' Harry thought. It seemed like a likely exit door for an... eccentric man like Dumbledore. 'Maybe it was a bit too personal.'

Chapter 8: Students Returning and Quidditch Referees

A thick snow blanket covered the grounds of Hogwarts when the train returned, a day before classes started again. When Hermione came out, it was with an air of relief, as if she had been afraid the wizarding world had been only a dream. As for Draco, trumpets and drums might as well have followed. Harry wouldn't have been surprised in the boy started yelling "Tremble, mortals! Draco Malfoy is here!" in a deep, echoing demonic voice.

Harry, Blaise and Weasley were all waiting near the gates of the castle. Hermione gave a look at the three and gawked.

"Ron? I thought you hated Slytherins!"

"I—I do!"

"Oh, I'm hurt, Ronniekins." Blaise taunted, grinning, in a false 'Disbelieving lady' air that was totally unrealistic when said by a 11 years old. "What about last night? Was it just a one-night stand?" The red-eared red-head shot her a withering glare that left her completely, totally and incredibly unfazed.

Hermione burst out laughing, and was still laughing when Draco arrived, flanked as always by Crabbe and Goyle.

"Hey Harry! Hey Blaise!" He said, smirking, turning to Weasley. "What happened? Decided your family and Gryffindor friends were too simple-minded and lacked the ambition to become prosper in life?"

"No." Ron said, his ears reddening in anger at his family being insulted.

"Pity for you then." Draco said with a shrug, walking in the castle with the other two Slytherins.

"Later Hermione!" Harry said, before looking at Weasley. "Same to you, Weasley!"

The bushy-haired girl waved the five other first years goodbye, before turning to Ron and asking with a smile and a slightly amused tone:

"What was that all about?"

They entered the Slytherin common room and sat down near the fire, Draco doing a show of sprawling himself on the sofa, smirking. In the dim light of the common room, one would have easily mistook him either for a vampire with glowing hair or a walking and taunting flashlight – Both of which were possible with a bit of magic. He turned to his friends and gave them an odd, questioning look.

“What was Weasley doing with you two?”

“Open your ears, Draco, it’s time for a newsflash.” Harry said, before plunging himself in the story of the winter break...

“...can’t believe how much I missed.” Draco said. “I guess even Weasley has his uses.”

“Happens to everyone at least once in their lives.” Harry said.

“Too bad for Weasley then.” Blaise added, creating chuckles all around. “How was your holiday, Draco?”

Draco yawned theatrically, spread himself out on the couch and smirked tiredly at Blaise before answering in a drawl. “Boring. The manor was full of guests I didn’t know, all dressed in gloomy black robes. It looked more like a funeral than a Christmas party, that’s for sure.”

“And they stayed the *whole* holidays?”

Draco nodded. “At least Crabbe, Goyle and Pansy were there, so I wasn’t too bored to death.”

“Those three came and we couldn’t?” Harry asked, giving him an odd look.

Draco gave Harry a nervous look he only rarely showed. “Well... no. You couldn’t. I have nothing against either of you, but my parents certainly *will*.”

Harry nodded, understanding. The words Draco had said at the start of winter came back to his mind.

“Your name is liked by most, not all.”

But what could they find on Blaise?

And, more importantly, why would Mr. Malfoy hate him?

The Gryffindor team’s Quidditch match against Hufflepuff ended in a solid victory for Gryffindor that put them back in the race. The week afterwards would be the Slytherin match against Ravenclaw, who, as Flint said, relied mostly on disorienting aerial Chaser techniques. Their seeker was an utter failure, however.

“Checkmate.” Draco said, grinning triumphantly.

Blaise gave a wide-eyed look at the checkboard before her while her pieces groaned loudly and berated at her – “I told you to send me to blast that rook 3 turns ago! Did you listen? Nooo!” scolded the tower – and glared at the platinum-haired boy.

“I am the *top* chess player of the school.” He said, not without a touch of vanity.

“From what Hermione told me, Weasley’s pretty good too.” Blaise said.

“Really? I’ll have to disillusion him later.” Draco said as the low rumble of the door opening took their attention toward the entrance of the common room.

Flint strode in, wearing a victorious smirk, his eyes shining like headlights with happiness. He walked straight to Harry, giving signs at the other members of the Quidditch team, making them come over.

Once everyone was in a circle around Flint, the burly boy decided to drop the bomb on them. Figuratively of course, since he didn’t want to kill his team before the match. Afterwards was a fair game, though.

“Snape decided to referee the next match. Probably used another one of his favors on Dumbledore.” The captain said with an excited tone in his voice. Harry felt a pang at his heart, remembering what had happened at his last match, with Snape trying to curse his broom.

The captain continued his tirade. "And you know what that means, right?"

"That means we win, no matter what!!" Bole said with a smirk.

Flint shot him a deathly 'Did you ask my permission to take your first breath, idiot?' glare, prompting him to shut (the hell) up.

"Yes, as Bole so bluntly said it, we win. That is, unless that Seeker of theirs catches the snitch."

The look Flint gave Harry at this moment was *probably* intended as motivation. And, while it certainly worked, the word *intimidation* would fit it a lot better.

"I doubt our Harry's gonna miss the snitch." Blaise said, tapping the black-haired boy's back with a smirk. However, Harry could see it was forced. She knew as well.

"If he does, then he's definitely off the team." Flint warned, glaring at her. The girl squeaked and hid behind Draco, who looked afraid he would turn his 'instant death glare, just add water' at him.

To his luck, Flint turned back toward Harry. "Just don't do aerial acrobatics this time. The Ravenclaws are set to win, they're not the stupid noble idiots that the Gryffindors are."

"Yeah, yeah." Harry said, eager to get the captain away from him. "I'll catch that snitch even if it's the last thing I do."

Flint seemed satisfied; it *did* indeed look like what he wanted. Apparently, he didn't give a damn about his players' lives, he just wanted to win.

And that was exactly the philosophy of another student in the common room, who looked at the captain's words like a divine revelation that came on an express from heaven.

...like anything that came out of Flint's mouth could be qualified as such.

Later that day, Harry, Blaise and Draco went to a quiet corner of the common room, the practically always empty 'dark corner', the coldest place of the dungeons. They spoke in quiet, hushed voices that were expected from this place.

"Guys, I'm a bit worried about this." Blaise said. "I mean, Snape tried to throw Harry off his broom last match!"

"He did, too." Harry said, remembering. "Good thing that Gryffindor chaser was there."

"That's you, falling all over the girls at eleven. Can't wait to see what you turn up like." Draco said with a smirk. Harry shot him a mock glare.

"Ah yes, I can see it now." Blaise continued with a false look of concentration. "Harry Potter, the womanizer, using his fame and fortune to win poor, innocent girls' hearts."

"Oi, shut up, both of you." Harry said, blushing not just a bit. "The thing is, I want one of you to keep watch on Snape during the match, in case he tries again."

"I don't think it was him." Draco said. "I think it was Quirrell."

"Y-y-yeah r-right." Blaise stuttered in a mocking imitation of the aforementioned teacher. "As if he can stop muttering long enough to do a single incantation."

"W-W-Ing-gar-d-diu-ium L-lev-lis-eviosa!" Harry imitated with a grin, causing laughs around the corner, causing few students to look their way.

"We'll watch Snape during the match, Harry." Blaise said.

"Yeah, just in case I'm wrong... though I'm sure it's Quirrell." Draco added. "I want to test out that 'Incendio' hex mom taught us during the holidays."

Snape didn't look too nervous. In fact, he was exactly his normal, if unsupportable self. He handed them the results for their potions.

Surprisingly, Harry had a good grade. He had expected much, much less than eighty percent. On the other hand, Hermione looked like she had just seen an army of Gorgons getting hair-care, while listening to a choir of Banshees singing a duo with a Nundu, breath included. In a word, mortified.

"It's gonna break my average!" she moaned.

The following week passed quickly. The trio made it a habit to go to the library every day after supper, meeting the two Gryffindors there and working on Nicholas Flamel. They had found only vague references, including one that claimed the man had lived in the 1600s in *History of Europe's magical world*.

"Probably another guy named the same way, nobody lives that long." Draco said.

It became obvious Blaise and Hermione were becoming quick friends. Through their differences, they could use each other's strengths to help the other. Hermione, while brilliant, was totally unable of sneakiness, something Blaise easily had in overdose.

"She certainly can hold a conversation better than the two Neanderthals you two have for dorm mates," She replied good naturedly when Draco had teased her for being too friendly to a Gryffindor. "And anyways, she comes from the muggle world, like me. So she isn't talking only about magical stuff. Her two dorm mates are pure-bloods like mine, so they're completely lost. She's getting sick of it, too."

"I'm not lost in the muggle world..." Harry said.

"You're probably the only pure-blood in school who knows anything about the muggle-world." Blaise said, giving him a smile.

"Yay for me then." He replied dryly, thinking of the price he paid for that knowledge.

“We have to continue looking! I’m sure we’ll find it today!” Hermione said in a voice that probably wanted itself hopeful, but was more desperate than anything else.

“Hermione, we’ve spent every free moment we had during the last two months in the library and we *still* haven’t found anything!” Weasley sighed in exasperation.

“I think Pince is thinking of opening us a private bedroom here.” Draco added

“I’m sure it’s around here somewhere...” Hermione said. Her voice sounded panicked, as if just realizing it is *possible* that the library didn’t have the answer sometimes. A scary concept for her.

“Forget it, Hermione.” Harry said, patting her back. “Let’s take a break today, ‘kay?”

She seemed to hesitate, but before the combined looks of everyone present, her stubbornness crumbled into fine, A-quality dust.

“Ooh, all right.”

And so, the group left the library. Outside the windows, the sky had a beautiful orange shade and was getting darker. They found an empty classroom, probably left unused for years, and started relaxing there. Blaise opened the content of her bag and revealed dozens of sweets of all kinds.

“..don’t you ever run out, Blaise?” Harry asked, eying the candies that Weasley and Draco were already separating into two neat piles: ‘Eaten’ and ‘to be eaten’.

“Nope.” She replied with a cheerful grin.

By the time the sun was nearly gone, the group had managed, in record times, to clean up the bags of Bertie Bott’s beans – to which Harry suspected Draco had found a way to separate the good from the bad, since Weasley kept falling on sarcastically delicious flavors such as Goblin blood, asphalt, dirt and spider leg – and most of the others. Only two boxes of chocolate frogs were left.

Draco took one and Blaise the other, both of them defending themselves as she was the one who had brought it and that he was just too lovable; the frogs loved him. Weasley and Hermione both shot Draco a look that clearly said “Yeah right.”. A look that was thoroughly ignored.

“So, what do you think are your chances for the Quidditch match?” Hermione asked.

Harry grinned. “You know I can’t say that to people of the other houses... but let’s just say that Snape is gonna be the referee, so...”

Weasley choose this moment to spit out, in a moment of surprise, the only good bean he had managed to get – chocolate, a bean that he had hesitated to take due to his luck – into Blaise’s face.

“Snape is the referee?!?” He gasped, ignoring the death glare from the dark red-haired girl.

“Yes, you’re not quite deaf yet, he *is*.” Draco said proudly, ripping the frog’s head off and watching it spasm it’s last movements.

“That means Slytherin wins.” Weasley sighed, almost ignoring Draco’s taunt. .

“Exactly... Aww man, another Dumbledore.” Draco sighed, looking at the card. He threw it on the table, straight in front of Hermione, who picked it up.

“course, I still have to catch the Snitch, but that wont be a probl—”
“Guys, listen to this!!” Hermione interrupted Harry, who shot her a ‘let me finish one day, will you?’ look. She didn’t see it, her wide and surprised eyes were locked on the card.

“Yeah, yeah, it’s a card of Dumbledore. So what?” Draco said, his booted foot finding it’s way on the table.

She glared at him a ‘shut up!!’ and turned back to the card.

"Albus Dumbledore, currently Headmaster of Hogwarts. Considered by many the greatest wizard of modern times, Professor Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the dark wizard Grindewald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon's blood and his

work on alchemy with his partner, Nicolas Flamel." She stopped reading and looked up at them, a look that promised certain boredom. The 'eureka' look.

"I gotta get something, I'll be right back." She said so quickly it sounded like 'I Gotget smthah'll be rabah'

She grabbed her bag and dashed off toward the library, coming back in record time, out of breath and carrying a huge book.

"I am such an idiot!" She said, walking in the empty classroom, probably having no idea of how silly she sounded. Her? An idiot? Yeah, and Crabbe and Goyle are rocket scientists feel sorry for the astronauts, everyone. "I should have remembered! Listen here:

"The ancient study of alchemy is concerned with making the Philosopher's Stone, a legendary substance with astonishing powers. The

Stone will transform any metal into pure gold. It also produces the Elixir

of Life, which will make the drinker immortal. There have been many reports

of the Philosopher's Stone over the centuries, but the only Stone currently

in existence belongs to Mr Nicolas Flamel, the noted alchemist and opera-lover. Mr Flamel, who celebrated his six hundred and sixty-fifth birthday last year, enjoys a quiet life in Devon with his wife, Perenelle

(six hundred and fifty-eight)."

Everyone was silent. Weasley whistled.

"That's some rock." He said. "Infinite money and eternal life... I want one."

Draco grinned, then chuckled, a chuckle that turned into a laugh. The others looked at him like he had sprouted two blue and pink-haired

heads that promptly declared themselves Napoleon at the same time and started bickering about which one was the real one.

“What’s with him?” Hermione asked.

“He’s gone totally nutters.” Weasley replied, twirling a finger around his ear and pulling out his tongue.

“Nice face, Weasley.” Blaise said with a smirk. “With a bit of luck, it’ll stay that way, which would be an improvement.”

As Weasley’s ears took a bright tint of red, Draco’s laughs calmed a bit and he grinned, looking at everyone.

“Don’t you find it ironic? We spend weeks trying to find stuff on that guy, and the one day we *don’t* look, we find it.”

“Yeah, well at least now we don’t need to spend another evening on this.” Harry said with a chuckle.

“I wouldn’t mind looking for another wizard using the method we just used though.” Blaise said, popping the foot of her chocolate frog in her mouth while everyone laughed.

The date of the match came quickly. Some kind of wicked belt called Anxiety found it’s way into Harry’s chest to ensnare his heart, getting tighter with every passing moment. No matter how hard he tried to take it out through thinking of something else than the looming broomstick-shaped menace, it just wouldn’t work. Flint drilling them in tactics wasn’t helping, and neither were the ‘encouraging’ taps on his back and wishes of good luck.

“Hey, Potter...” Said a boy’s voice the day just before the match, during supper.

It was Terence Higgs, the precedent seeker. He was smiling at him, holding a bottle of golden-brown liquid.

Slytherin code of conduct rules 55 and 56: When someone pat you in the back, check for a knife. The larger the smile, the sharper the knife.

“Ever tried Butterbeer?” He asked, showing the bottle. “It’s great.”

“Um.. no.” Harry replied, mindful. Higgs had been the seeker before him, and was now offering him something to drink. Suspicious wasn’t quite the word.

Higgs filled up two cups and picked one of them up, smiling at Harry. “You ready for the match tomorrow?”

“Yeah.. aren’t you mad at me for taking your position?”

The older boy shook his head. “Naa. I’ve seen you play. You’re very good, for a firstie. Better than me, actually!”

Harry picked up the cup. Higgs looked and sounded sincere enough.

“To Slytherin?” the older boy proposed.

“To Slytherin.” Harry agreed, smiling and tapping their glasses. He brought the cup to his lips, but kept them closed until he noticed Higgs really was drinking. Figuring it was safe enough, he drank and drained it. While it certainly tasted delicious, he was still a bit wary. Had he just made a mistake?

...something told him that yes.

‘Ground, swallow me whole. Now.please? Pretty please with sugar and cherries on top?’

But the stubborn ground would not listen the poor Seeker and, the next day, he found himself on his broomstick, hovering a dozen feet above the ground, waiting for Hooch to blow her whistle.

(A/N: Erm... Gotta get my mind out of the gutter... ^_^';;;)

Hooch was giving her traditional speech to the two captains, who both looked bored out of their minds. At least Flint was. The Ravenclaw captain, one of the chasers, gave a nervous look at Snape, who was hovering some distance away from them.

“I want a clean match—” ‘This time’, Harry mentally added. “—understand? That goes especially for you, Flint. Don’t your team dare cheat.”

“Of course not.” Flint said in false innocence. It looked about as sincere as a stray, alley cat knocking at a mouse’s door and saying “Don’t worry, I’m not hungry.”

Hooch apparently thought so, because she shot him a piercing glare that left him unfazed. With a sigh and probably wondering why she was letting the Slytherins play, she released the balls and blew her whistle.

Immediately, the match was on. Harry blocked out Jordan’s (as usual) biased comments and immediately flew up, the snitch vanishing immediately upon it’s release. The sky was clear blue and there was barely any wind, a completely still spring day. Patches of yellowed grass and muddled dirt could be seen peeking out of the melting blanket of snow. From high above, it was a beautiful sight.

Harry’s musings were cut short as a Bludger whizzed an inch in front of his face. He stopped high above the action and started looking around. The other seeker, a respectably large sixth year boy who would have been better placed as beater, flew in circles around the pitch, not an exactly bad seeking technique, but not excellent either, since one tended not to look long enough to actually find anything.

The Slytherin chasers were passing the quaffle very quickly between themselves, confusing the Ravensclaws out of their usually tricky chaser techniques. However, their keeper was evidently very practiced; during the first ten minutes, the Slytherins shot at least 10 times, but none of them managed to go through, even with feints and last-minute passes.

As the Slytherin code of conduct says, if fair means have failed you, it’s time to resort to fowl.

Two Bludgers rammed simultaneously in the keeper’s stomach as soon as Flint was close enough to shoot. The Ravenclaw player fell out of the sky and into the sand like a bag of potatoes, obviously hurt.

Flint shot at the goals and Snape whistled a time out only *after* the goal was counted.

“The Ravenclaw team rushes to their keeper’s help while the counter shows 10 to 0 Slytherin, after an absolutely scandalous act of bias from the *referee*—”

“Jordan, do *not* badmouth a teacher!”

“Ok, ok, even if he *is* a lying and cheating creep. Well, it looks like the keeper’s all right and is back in the game...” Jordan’s tone was suddenly nervous, as if McGonagall had started glaring at him. Which she probably had.

Harry almost cheered for Jordan, completely agreeing with him. Although he didn’t mind the fact that Snape was helping him, for once in his life. He turned to look around for the snitch while the other seeker was busy helping his teammate back on his broom.

...that’s when it happened.

A searing pain, striking him as suddenly as a snake, starting in his stomach and spreading to his chest, hit him. He buckled on his broom, gritting his teeth and groaning in agony. He clenched his knees and fists on the broom, both to avoid falling and to take away the pain.

It dimmed a bit, but was still present and heavily uncomfortable.

Blaise looked up at her friend in worry. Something was wrong, she knew it. Beside her, Hermione was mumbling something about ‘Crazy balls that shouldn’t be allowed in a game’ while looking at the Ravenclaw keeper. Draco and Weasley were arguing again, with Crabbe and Goyle glaring at the red-head, who had pretty much been forced to assist at the match

None of them had noticed, she thought grimly. Maybe she was just imagining things.

“If you don’t catch that snitch, you’re off the team”

With those words of 'wisdom' from Flint in mind, Harry began looking for the fourth ball again. The game was back and nobody had noticed his problem yet.

"Pass to Montague, Ravenclaw in possession, another pass, intercepted by Flint, look at that Bludger fly! Ouch! Hope he broke his jaw... just kidding, professor! Pucey has the quaffle and... is that the snitch?!"

Harry whirled around and looked at the action. Sure enough, the snitch was there, flying in between the mass of players who had let the quaffle drop, which Flint immediately grabbed and tried to make a replay of the last match, but was stopped by the keeper this time.

The other seeker had just turned around that Harry dived at his top speed, aiming for the snitch. Just then, the pain got worse; instead of a burning feeling, it now felt like someone had slammed a burned white iron inside his stomach and started playing around with it. He felt like he could breathe fire, how his lungs felt like they were burning. One hand clutching his stomach, he willed his eyes open and continued chasing the snitch. He was at grabbing distance now.

He let go of the broom. His knees, feeling weak and unsteady, were the only things held him in the air, one of his hands still clutching his stomach, the other one stretched ahead of him toward the snitch. With a yell, he caught the snitch, before noticing the way he had been going. Straight toward the teachers' stands. With all the strength he could muster, he veered left, nearly topping Quirrell's turban off his head. His new trajectory got him straight toward Hogwarts, and to his dismay, the pain started up again as he was about to change direction.

With a sound of shattering glass, he fell unconscious.

Chapter 9: Motherly instinct

Heavy.

Yup, heavy.

You read well, heavy.

What's heavy, you ask? Well that's how Harry felt when he came back to the world of the not-so-awake: Heavy. Not the 'I gained 10 pounds in 2 minutes' heavy, but the 'I gained 10 tons in 2 seconds' heavy.

Hmm, maybe it was also because he felt extremely tired. And sore. Sore like he had decided to take a jog in front of a roller and fell down, like he had decided to dance a waltz with an elephant called 'Longbottom', like he had decided to try bungee without elastic over a bottomless-pit-that-wasn't-so-bottomless-after-all. Need more examples? Bad, bad reader then.

Based on what he felt, he easily guessed where he was. The "light" sheets that weighted tons covering his tired body, or the crispy texture of the pillow and that annoying sterilized smell that was often associated to hospitals or, in this case, the infirmary.

"Do you think he'll wake up soon?" He heard a familiar female voice come to his ears.

Blaise.

"Well, I sure hope so. Quite a stunt he pulled though, almost crashing in the teachers and crashed straight into McGonagall's desk... it's a wonder his broom is still in one piece!" This time it was a just-as-familiar male voice.

Draco.

"He passed through a metal-reinforced window, crashed against a desk, rebounded head-first into a wall and landed on a bunch of chairs and you worry about his *broom*??!"

"Do you have any idea how much a Nimbus 2000 costs? Professor Snape isn't likely to buy another one."

After Blaise's indignant "Hmmp!", there was a moment of silence. Harry was almost tempted to try opening his two-tons-too-heavy eyelids, but Draco broke the silence before he could.

"Did they find who poisoned him?"

Poisoned?!

"Yeah, it was Higgs. The idiot used one of the potions he was best at, and he's pretty much the only one to have managed it in his year. Heard he got himself a full month of detention with Filch and that he lost about 150 points... not counting the fact that he's banned from the Quidditch pitch forever." Blaise said.

"Too bad McGonagall decided to butt in and remove the points though."

"Well, she wants Gryffindor to win, no matter what. We're still in second place, though."

"Just second place?" Harry whined, opening his eyes. "That means we'd better work extra-hard."

"You were awake?" Blaise said, a slightly menacing tone in her voice.

"Since you asked when I was gonna wake up." Harry replied nonchalantly, noting the irony.

"Glad to have you back, Harry." Draco said with a grin. "You were out for two days."

"Two days?!"

"Just the time to flush the poison out." Blaise added.

Harry tried to sit up, but his whole back protested and launched anchors back down on the bed, making him crash back. His arm felt sore and the back of his head, along with his neck, were killing him. He looked at his left arm, which felt very sore. It was in a cast.

Attracted by the squeaking noise of his heavy landing on the bed, Pomfrey quickly came like some kind of spider with something in her web. With Blaise and Draco watching in the background, she inspected him. After a minute, she let out a sigh and looked at Harry.

"You're lucky to be so well off." She said. "The poison is completely gone and the bruises are healing. Although you'll have to keep that cast for a while."

"I thought you could mend bones easily..." Harry groaned. The prospect of having a cast for any periods of time between 'another second' and 'Forever' was appalling at best.

"I usually can, but I already used enough magic getting rid of the poison. Using any more would be dangerous."

"Why?" Draco asked.

She gave him a glare and turned back to Harry, who was looking at her with a puzzled expression. With a sigh, she started explaining.

"The magic I used to purge the poison from your system is still in your blood, making sure there's nothing left. If I add up any more, the effect is chaotic at best. You might end up with a rabbit ear, a fish tail or, more dangerously, one of your organs changing inside you. Imagine you suddenly end up with a fly's heart, or that your lungs suddenly start growing warts."

Harry winced at the picture, then grinned nervously. "Ok, a cast sounds good right now..."

Blaise checked her watch and gasped. "Oh great, Transfiguration. And we're late. McGonagall's gonna have our heads."

"Gotta run! Sorry to leave you alone with her, mate!" Draco called as they ran out of the infirmary. Pomfrey's outraged expression was almost funny.

...at least until she decided to check if the cast was well in place.

Few hours later, the sky outside was growing darker. He had long since figured out he would spend the night in the infirmary, which did *not* cheer him any. Pomfrey came and went every now and then, students walked in afflicted in all kinds of problems; a Hufflepuff walking in with her hair made out of spider web, a Ravenclaw with a pair of overgrown fly wings and big antennas, constantly muttering “zzz”... the list was long and fairly entertaining, especially that Gryffindor who had a banana in his ear.

The door opened again, letting another wounded student inside. Harry didn't even look, he was watching the squid in the lake, who was currently wrestling with it's own tentacles. The things some people do for fun... *sigh*

“Mister Weasley, what in the world?!”

“Erm...” Replied a familiar voice. “I got bitten by a dog.”

“Must have been some dog.” Pomfrey replied.

Harry tried to look, but the two had already taken refuge in another section of the infirmary. He could still pick up their voices, though.

“...my goodness, what did that dog look like?!”

“Well, I didn't really see it...” Weasley admitted. “It kinda attacked me for no reason.”

‘Weasley, you are one horrible liar.’ Harry noted.

“Well I can safely say that this... *dog* was venomous. I'll be right back.”

Pomfrey got up and walked straight to the pharmacy, where she kept her antidotes. Harry risked a peek

Weasley looked barely different than usual. His face contorted in barely contained pain, his hair looking like a mass of red lightning bolts, his right hand clenched around the left one, which was about twice as big as a normal hand's size and tainted in an unhealthy green color.

Exactly as usual.

...ok, maybe not.

‘A *dog*, eh?’ he thought, sitting back on his bed, his reconnaissance mission completely unseen. ‘*Yeah right. I have to know what did that*’

Curiosity killed the cat. Good thing Harry wasn’t a cat, then.

Pomfrey came back to Weasley with a bottle of purple liquid. A second later, a quick “Drink.” was said, followed by an instant of silence interrupted by a disgusted “Echh! What *is* this stuff?!”

‘*Rat brains*’ Harry thought with a smirk.

“A multi-purpose antidote.” The medi-witch replied, much to Harry’s chagrin. “Hopefully the swelling will stop. As for your... *dog*,” And the word was said in a tone dripping... nay, flooding with skepticism “I will ask Filch to be on the lookout. Let’s hope it won’t bite anymore people.”

She walked away soon after. When he thought he was alone, Weasley muttered ‘Bloody idiot and his dragon...’

It didn’t take long for Harry to put two and two together.

*Idiot and his **Dragon**.*

“*Oh, I wish I had a drag’n, I dream ‘bout it since I’m a little kid...*”

Hagrid has a *dragon*.

‘*Bloody hell.*’ He thought.

Harry Potter, the nightstalker. It had a ring to it, but the boy in question certainly didn’t want to be known as such. Probably because being *known* for that would remove the whole purpose of *sneaking around at night*.

Sneaking out of the infirmary toward the Slytherin common room, he dearly wished he had his cloak on him, but in absence of that, his five senses and hope that lady luck was on his side would have to suffice.

And usually, she was at his side like a sick puppy glued to his leg.

After managing to avoid Filch not once but twice, he found himself in front of the Slytherin common room door.

“Immortalis!” He whispered.

The door swung open, allowing him to enter. As he had expected, the room was completely empty. The fire was still burning, casting a rather eerie light on the area. With a decided and silent step, Harry sneaked up his dormitory, climbing the stairs as stealthily as he could.

He opened the door, finding the rest of the boys sleeping soundly, Draco silently – and hugging his green with blue dots stuffed dragon called Frilly close to him – while Crabbe and Goyle were doing their usual rigorous imitation of the Hogwarts express. With a slight grin, Harry dug into his things and took out his invisibility cloak.

Feeling safer, Harry sneaked out of the dormitories again. Avoiding Peeves spreading oil all over the stairs, and avoiding the stairs themselves, he managed to slip outside unnoticed, immediately walking toward the dim lights in the distance betraying the presence of Hagrid’s cabin.

Walking inside Hagrid’s giant footsteps on the melting snow, he easily reached the house. Faintly, he could hear voices from inside.

“...how are we gonna manage it?”

“I don’t know.” Replied a voice that he recognized as Blaise, answering Hermione.

“How ‘bout he stays here...?”

“Hagrid, Norbert is just two weeks old and he’s already big enough to fill up half of your house.” Hermione replied.

“And as Hermione so eloquently put it a while back, your house is in wood...”

“I could tie ‘im up outside... so he’ll be able teh walk ‘roud a bit...”

“And then everyone would see him and you’d be in big trouble.”

Harry removed his cloak, hid it in his pocket and pushed the door open. The house was exactly as it had always been; a single room with a large teared up bed, a table that had one of it’s legs chopped off, the claw marks on the wooden floor, which was littered with empty cognac bottles and chicken feathers. Oh, and let’s not forget the huge dragon giving him a feral look. The three humans inside tensed up, but relaxed when they saw him.

“arry, aren’t yeh supposed teh be in the infirmary?”

Harry shrugged. “Like I’d spend the night in the same room as Weasley while I can play with a dragon.” He pointed at the beast, who was looking at him with smoke pouring out of it’s nostrils, licking it’s lips. As if either one was actually an enjoyable activity.

“You knew?!” Hermione gasped.

“Well, with Weasley coming in the infirmary with a hand as big as a baseball glove and his muttering, it was kinda easy to guess.”

“Think anyone else guessed?” Blaise asked.

He shook his head, but gave a look at Hagrid. “Though if what I heard is right, People *will* pretty soon.”

The dragon was huge, filling up at least half the house by itself. Pretty soon it would be too big, and it would learn how to breathe fire. And when that was done... well, let’s just hope Hagrid’s got good fire insurance.

Harry wasn’t about to let that happen to his friend.

A brown, tawny owl flew in through the window, dropped a letter on Hermione's lap and, with a single look at the dragon, quickly flew out with as much calm as a crowd parachuting into Godzilla's 'nest o' luv'.

She ripped the letter open and quickly scanned it.

"It's from Charlie... he's coming tomorrow to take Norbert. He'll meet us---"

"Norbert?" Harry interrupted with a look at the dragon. "*Norbert?!'*"

"He'll meet us," Hermione continued with a glare at the Slytherin boy, "at the top of the tallest tower."

"That would be the astronomy tower." Blaise reminded.

"Hold on, who's Charlie?" Harry asked.

"It's Ron's older brother... well, the second oldest." Hermione answered.

"Geez, how many brother does Weasley have?!"

"He's got five brothers and one little sister. She'll be here next year."

Harry let out a groan. "So we'll have the walking rulebook, the terror twins, the freckled wonder and the little squirt at the same time? Somebody stop those rabbits..."

"Harry!" Hermione snapped with a glare, shutting the boy up. Instead, he turned to Blaise.

"So tomorrow, we'll hand *Norbert*!" The name was said in such a tone of disbelief it made someone saying 'I've got an army of mutant zombie lizards running after me, they want to kill me with those deadly, evil and painful play-doe balls!' sound honest. "over to Weasley's brother. And I bet you girls are gonna need my help, right?"

Blaise nodded. "Remember to bring your you-know-what, we don't want to be caught by Filch or Norris."

Hagrid and Hermione gave her an odd look. Harry nodded and winked at Hermione.

“Don’t worry, it’s not against the rules as long as no teacher knows about it.”

“Doesn’t Dumbledore know...?” Blaise asked.

“He’s the headmaster, not a teacher.” Harry explained, as if that was any safer. Hagrid was positively puzzled, but didn’t ask. And Norbert decided to chew on the remains of a broken bottle of cognac.

Harry went back to the infirmary just as the sun rose. Unfortunately for him, Pomfrey had checked up on his presence during the night and found he wasn’t there. He quickly made up a story involving having a heart breaking nightmare about his parents’ deaths – People tend to believe dramatic and sad stories, after all - deciding to take a walk to calm his mind, barely avoiding Filch, Peeves and Norris by running outside the school, finding a hidden secret passage back inside near sunrise and barely managing to come back in the infirmary alive.

At least his story didn’t involve a five meter long venomous dog. Called *Norbert*.

Pomfrey passably believed it, but decided to keep him in observation all day long, in case he had caught something during his nightly excursions— escape.

Harry wasn’t mad, actually. He used the extra time to catch up on his sleep, which had been lacking from the previous night. Before he knew it, it was night again. Getting up, he wrapped his invisibility cloak around him and, after reorganizing the bed sheets in a believable “there’s a boy here” way, and slipped out of the infirmary. Weasley’s hand had swelled down quite a bit, but Pomfrey said that without knowing exactly what type of poison it was, there was no way she would release him before the next day.

He easily reached the Slytherin common room, where he found Blaise waiting for him. They both had agreed not to let Draco in on the plan, since he didn't like Hagrid much. Hermione had absolutely refused to be left behind, thus the fat lady's portrait was the next stop.

Blaise guided him toward the "elusive" Gryffindor tower, which was pretty much the most obvious of all common rooms. Then again, obvious places for obvious people. Hermione was waiting outside the room, having, for some unknown and probably incomprehensible reason refused to hand the Gryffindor password to two Slytherins.

Of course, because of the invisibility cloak, she couldn't see them. Her arms crossed, tapping her foot impatiently under the questioning look of the fat lady, she looked quite angry and eager to leave.

Grinning, the two Slytherins sneaked behind her and started pushing her forward. Her eyes became wide as saucers, her head whirling to look behind her, her bushy brown hair whipping Harry's face as it went.

"What the..." she started.

"It's us..." Blaise hissed. As soon as they were away from a puzzled-looking portrait, Harry lifted the cloak, pulled Hermione in and lowered it again.

She gave a wide-eyed stare at her friends, looking at the cloak around her.

"That's... an invisibility cloak! Amazing!" She whispered in awe. "Is it yours?" She asked Blaise.

"Naa, it's Harry's. It used to be his dad's."

Harry nodded as they started walking toward the entry hall, intent on going out to meet Hagrid and gather Norbert.

"Must have been useful for the night rounds... troublemakers wouldn't know when to hide..." Hermione continued.

“What are you talking about?” Harry asked, his ears struggling to hear if a teacher was coming.

“Didn’t you know? He used to be head boy when he was here. Your mom was head girl as far as I know.”

Harry whirled around to face her, his eyes wide in surprise. “Where did you read that?”

“Burrowed a book from the Library, *Prefects who gained power*. A fascinating read, really...”

“Even *if* he was head boy,” Blaise said, grinning slightly, “something tells me he used it for something *totally* different than his prefect duties.”

Hermione looked scandalized. “Surely a *head boy* wouldn’t break rules—”

“Shut up, both of you!” Harry snapped. “Not one word ‘till we reach Hagrid and... *Norbert*.” Again, the disbelief flood gates were open.

The two girls kept silent the rest of the way, though he was certain Blaise stepped on his foot on purpose. Unless a step needs enough power to squash a tank in pancake mode. Soon enough, they had to silently pull open the main doors. It wasn’t easy. Do you have any idea how hard it is to open a pair of sixteen feet tall oak doors that weight as much as a couch potato one ‘Calorie 5001’ without making a sound? No? Thought so. Well it’s hard.

...at least until Hermione decides to act smart and use a spell, to which both Slytherin whacked their foreheads. Magical instincts weren’t quite installed yet.

They found Hagrid waiting just outside of his hut, his eyes glittering with tears at the thought of his impending separation with his monster—erm... kid.

“Hagrid!” Hermione called.

The man looked up in surprise, looking straight at them but his eyes not focused on them in an unnerving way. He was looking around wildly, before getting up, toting his crossbow.

“Who e‘zit?” He asked, his voice not quite as stable as usual. As an empty cognac bottle laying in the snow betrayed, he had tried to drink out his sorrows.

Harry quickly whipped the invisibility cloak off them. It took nearly three seconds for Hagrid to recognize them, but when he did he bust out in tears and sat back down on his seat.

“So, yer ‘ere teh tak’ ‘im ‘way now? It’s too soon!” He wailed.

“It’s an half hour to midnight, Hagrid.” Hermione said, checking her watch. “Charlie’s gonna be here soon.”

“Yea, I know, but whu’tif... whu’tif the othe’ Drag’ns dun’ like ‘im?” When drunk, Hagrid’s accent was even thicker than before. “Whu’tif he’s nut happy there?”

‘Oh, he’ll be happy as long as he’s got things to smash, burn, crush or hurt.’ Harry mused. “He’ll be fine, Hagrid. He’ll be with his own kind, with people who take care of others like him for a living.” He said and, with a smirk, added: “Anyway, this Weasley can’t be worse than his brothers.”

Hermione glared at him and punched his shoulder. “Be nice, Ron’s my friend.”

“What about *his* brothers?”

“*They* are annoying.” She admitted.

With a victorious smirk, Harry shrugged and dropped the subject, turning to Hagrid. “Is... *Norbert* ready?” He asked, struggling not to burst out laughing.

“Yea,” Hagrid replied, pointing to a large box at the side of the house. “He’s ‘n ther’. I hope he wun’ be too cramped up... oh, an’ I gave ‘im is fav’rite teddy bear so he wun’t be lonely...”

A sharp tearing noise came from inside the box, announcing the immediate and not mourned passing of said teddy bear.

“C’mon, we have to go.” Harry said to the girls. “Weasley’s coming soon.”

Hermione pointed her wand at the box and muttered “Mobilipys!”

“Isn’t it supposed to be *Mobilicorpus*?” Blaise asked as the box started floating.

“*Mobilicorpus* moves bodies, like the spell says. That’s what it means in latin.” The other girl explained. “*Mobilipys* moves boxes.”

Harry wrapped the invisibility cloak around the box. While Mobilipys was strong enough to lift up the box and the dragon – which was now trying to break the sides of the box in pieces – it would have been hazardous to put anymore strain on the spell. So, with Blaise and Hermione in front and Harry in the back, everyone covered by the – apparently extensible- invisibility cloak, Norbert began his ascension toward the astronomy tower.

On the way there, passing near a crossway near the infirmary, they heard a pair of voices echo in the halls.

“Out of your dormitory after curfew, are you?” Filch’s nearly ecstatic voice hissed.

“But... But sir, I tell you, Potter’s trying to get a teacher in trouble! I’m only trying to help!” Another familiar voice said.

“Oh Ron...” Hermione gasped in horror.

“Stupid move, Weasley.” Harry whispered. “That’ll cost Gryffindor a few points and a detention for him at least... not to mention an earful from Pomfrey.”

With no more interruptions or trouble, the three children and the softly growling box made it to the astronomy tower. Climbing the stairs had been an adventure in itself, as Norbert wasn't enjoying the box's shaking or the fact that they were constantly turning. Harry couldn't help but stare nervously at the air-holes in the box, out of which dark grey smoke could be seen coming out. What if Norbert tried to burn the box open? He mentally thanked the fact that he was behind, although he felt a bit worried for the two girls in front.

They were quite happy when they reached the top. Jumping out of the cloak, Hermione immediately glared at Harry.

"What was *that* about?! Getting a teacher into trouble?!"

"He probably thought I wanted to get Hagrid into trouble with Norbert... as *if*! I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for him and Blaise's mom." Harry answered her accusation.

"Not too quick on the trigger, is he?" Blaise asked.

Hermione choose to keep quiet and sat on one of the chairs they used in astronomy, checking her watch impatiently.

"We're on time... they're late."

"Well, it *is* Weasley's brother after all." Harry mused.

"What in the world did Ron do to you to make you hate him that much?" Hermione snapped.

"Don't get me wrong, 'mione. I don't *hate* him." Harry said. "But he *can* be pretty annoying with his '*All Slytherins are dark wizards*' thing. We're not *all* creeps. Unfortunately, the most famous Slytherins usually are."

"You mean you're a creep?" Blaise asked playfully.

He shot a mock glare at Blaise, which caused the girl to theatrically gasp, grasp her heart and fake a faint.

"They're here!" Hermione called. "Up there!"

The two Slytherins looked up at where the Gryffindor girl was pointing. True enough, their shapes dimly reflecting the half-full moon's pale silver light, four figures could be seen flying over the lake. From their position on top of the tower, Harry could guess they were coming by broom, based on the hunched-up shape they had. He wasn't the youngest Quidditch player in a century to not guess that.

Sure enough, the four cloaked shapes flew over to them. They were effectively sitting on brooms, which all had burn marks or other scars associated with dragons. Harry almost flinched and yelled "Sacrilege!" at their sight. Wearing clothes that were most likely fire-proof and thick enough to let someone survive a dragon's vicious claws, their faces cloaked by thick black masks that would protect their faces in case they were directly in the breath's target area.

"Harry Potter, Hermione Granger and Blaise Zabini, I presume?" One of the four said in a young adult male voice.

Harry nodded for them all.

The figure snorted. "Of course you're Harry Potter... where was my mind..."

"Must be a family thing." Harry mused.

He pulled on his mask, revealing the face behind, then removed the cloth from around his head.

The typical Weasley red hair was the only thing Charlie Weasley had in common with his smallest brother. Bearing a recent-looking burn that must have been quite painful to receive across his left cheek, his freckles so densely packed across his face they made it look like he was tanned, the young man was more built than his lanky brother, and would most likely be smaller when the young one would grow up.

"So, the dragon's in there?" Charlie asked, pointing at the box. "should have known Hagrid would get one, one day..."

With a chuckle, he motioned for the other three, who swooped down and placed the box on a net, which they tied on their brooms before lifting up.

"We'll be going now... you lot better get back in your common rooms before someone notices your gone." The dragon tamer said before he and the others lifted off.

Agreeing, the children scrambled down the tower and were about to separate to head back respectively to the Gryffindor tower, the Slytherin common room and the infirmary when a terrifying voice came to their ears.

"Well, well. What do we have here." Said Filch, the caretaker, his cat looking at the three first years with a malicious glint in her eyes.

And only then did Harry notice the cloak was still in his pocket.

"Bloody hell."

Chapter 10: Red Stars and Silver Blood

“Well, well. What do we have here.” Said Filch, the caretaker, his cat looking at the three first years with a malicious glint in her eyes.

Cursing the inventor of too large jeans causing him to forget to cover himself with his invisibility cloak, along with his own scatter-mindedness and the – unfortunately – popular inventor of human stupidity.

He, Blaise and Hermione, caught by Filch sneaking out at night, climbing down from the astronomy tower – Said like this, it certainly didn’t sound right – looked at the man and his... pet cat, doing a perfect impersonation of a deer caught in the headlights.

“Follow me.” He hissed, his voice betraying inner glee at the thought of their punishment.

Warily, the three children followed the man/caretaker/demon-straight-from-hell’s-eighth-gate toward the entry hall, leading them up the main staircase. Hermione seemed to figure out where they were going, but the wide, horrified eyes and the audible swallowing sound she made didn’t reassure Harry any.

He led them to a large oak door, like so many in Hogwarts. Harry didn’t have the time to read the label on it that Filch had already pushed it open and pulled them inside.

There, A stern-looking McGonagall turned toward them from in front of the class, where she had been evidently scolding a sheepish Ron Weasley, who looked quite surprised at seeing Hermione with the two of them.

“I found those three sneaking out at night. I’ll entrust their punishment to your hands, professor.” Filch said. With a final victorious sneer at the four first years, he left.

“Harry Potter, Blaise Zabini and Hermione Granger... I must say I’m quite saddened to see a brilliant student such as yourself being... influenced like this.”

Hermione blushed bright red in humiliation. Harry almost wanted to defend her, but that would be revealing Hagrid’s secret.

McGonagall turned to Weasley and nodded. "It appears you were telling the truth after all, Harry Potter was out to cause trouble. It's good thing you warned us or Mister Filch might not have seen them."

Giving an apologetic glance at Hermione, the boy had the grace to flinch from the girl's ferocious glare. Harry understood; he didn't know Norbert was to be sent out today, so, in an attempt to get Harry in trouble, he had tried to warn the teachers. Not knowing he would put Hermione in the same position.

"I will take fifty points for every student out of bed, plus a detention."

"FIFTY..." Blaise gasped in horror. The folks of Slytherin would never let them live this down.

"Yes, Fifty, miss Zabini." McGonagall snapped. "That's a hundred from Gryffindor and another hundred from Slytherin."

"What? A hundred from Gryffindor?!" Weasley gasped. "But..."

"That *does* include you, mister Weasley. You will serve your detention like everyone else, since you *also* were out of bed after curfew. I'm very disappointed in both of you." She added with a look at Weasley and Hermione, who seemed to suddenly think the floor was a wonderful place where lots of magical – no pun intended – things happened and took a probably very useful glow-in-the-dark crimson color.

The next morning was terrible for all four students. Upon seeing the four hourglasses that held the points, their housemates had, at first, thought of a mistake. Because of their excursion, both Slytherin and Gryffindor lost their places, ending up respectively third and fourth, while Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff got the two first in the correct order. The two normally 'underdog' houses were delighted to see that, for once, they just might get to win the cup.

Soon, though, the truth spread. It was the hero of Slytherin, the boy-who-lived-to-break-rules Harry Potter that had lost Slytherin those points, while a pair of dumb Gryffindor first years lost the same for

their house. Blaise was, fortunately, barely noticed; Harry being the most famous of the two, he had the biggest back to take the blame. The price of fame, even if it's unwilling fame, is enormous.

Just walking in the halls became a chore. The Slytherins, if it was in their advantage, were generally a nice bunch toward each other. However, because of the points he had lost, Harry quickly found his popularity had shrank. The only good point, however, was that Snape stopped removing points from Slytherin because of him.

Quidditch practice became a fight for life; Budgers flying toward him seemed to multiply. More than once, he had to go back to the infirmary because of a broken bone or cracked ribs.

Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs alike congratulated him and thanked him for his *great* job, while the Gryffindors were also glad. But the fact that they were *still* behind Slytherin made them the less annoying of the four houses. Thank god for small blessings.

Draco was pretty much ignored. As he had an iron hand on Crabbe and Goyle, he set both of them to protecting Harry from the other Slytherins, and saved Harry's face in front of the two other Slytherin girls. Pansy was ready to accept whatever Draco was saying, while Millicent, though a bit suspicious, didn't want to be the only first year against him.

As for Hermione and Weasley, they both became sort of outcasts. While the girl was usually first to answer the questions, with an arm that could raise itself faster than light, she now kept it quiet and worked silently, not answering a single question that could save Gryffindor the humiliation of losing fourth. Her logic was a bit twisted.

Although her revenge on Weasley had been terrifying, involving a shouting session that had been heard all the way from the forbidden forest, it ended quickly, though she remained mad at him for a while. However, their exile from Gryffindor forced them to make up quickly.

The exams were coming quickly. With it, everyone had other things to worry about than a bunch of first years who lost a bunch of points. Plus, all the studying they were doing kept their minds off of their problems.

A week before the exams, however, passing in front of a bunch of empty classrooms coming back from the library after a study session, he, Draco, Blaise, Ron and Hermione heard something that reminded them of something they had nearly forgotten through all the chaos of Norbert's arrival and departure. The whole mess with the Philosopher's stone.

"No... no, don't do it again... please..." Quirrell's voice begged from inside an empty classroom.

"What in the world?" Draco hissed as they listened.

"Sounds like someone's threatening him." Weasley said.

"Snape?" Blaise asked.

"If it is, I can't hear him." Draco said.

"Ok, ok..." The teacher sobbed.

A second later, Quirrell ran out, re-placing his turban on his head, his eyes moist like he had just been crying.

"What a wimp." Draco chuckled.

"You think he's cracked?" Weasley asked Hermione.

"I hope not, but..." the girl replied.

"What do you mean?" Blaise asked.

"We figured out Snape's trying to break through the defenses set around the stone," Hermione explained. "He probably already knows what everyone else has placed there, except for Quirrell's. And I think that's not true anymore."

"You mean... Snape knows how to reach the stone?" Harry gasped.

"I'm still not sure it's Snape." Draco mumbled.

"Just because you're Snape's little favorite doesn't mean he's all good." Weasley grumbled.

"I'm just saying that things might not be what they seem, Weasley. Just because he roughens you up a bit doesn't mean he's the evilest bastard there is."

"I don't think he knows how to get past Fluffy yet though." Harry said, thinking back at the wound on Snape's leg back at Halloween.

"Let's hope Hagrid keeps it quiet then." Weasley voiced.

"How likely is that?" Draco asked.

"Not very." The red-head sighed.

The next morning, their detentions were given to them through owl post, with a single note.

Your detention will be tonight at eleven.

Meet mister Filch in the entry hall.

Prof. M. McGonagall

A quick look at Gryffindor table assured Harry that Weasley and Hermione had received theirs at the same time. Blaise glared angrily at hers while Draco theatrically stretched and yawned, being the only one who would have a full night of sleep.

The day passed as quickly as a mouse on steroids and other metabolism-enhancing substances escaping from an army of starving cheetahs and, all too soon, he was meeting the two Gryffindors in the entry hall, where a giddy looking Filch, holding a dimly lit lamp, was waiting for them, his... pet cat absent, probably lurking along the halls, trying to weasel out sneaking students.

"Ah, finally here, you two." Filch said, glaring at the two Slytherins. "Follow me."

They started walking toward the doors, which opened slightly by themselves to let them pass.

"I hope you'll think twice, now, before breaking the rules." He said in a mocking tone.

'Dry up and die' Harry thought.

"Work hard and suffer, that's the best way to learn, believe me! A real pain those softies removed corporal punishments... back then, they hung you upside down from the roof by your ankles for a few days..."

'Probably where the excess blood drowned the brain cells that held your common sense...' Harry thought.

"...I still got the chains in my desk, still usable, just in case those useless masses of fluff that call themselves governors decide to do something right for once."

Harry and Blaise shared a look that clearly meant they doubted of the man's sanity more than ever.

Walking on the grounds, trying to ignore the chilly night air touching his face and neck, he wondered what on earth their punishment could be. It probably was something terrible, since Filch looked ecstatic.

The moon was glowing, but the clouds that passed in front of it prevented its silvery light from reaching them. They could see bright lights in the windows of Hagrid's hut. A voice came to their ears.

"Is that yeh, Filch? Hurry up, I can't wait teh get start'd."

Hearing Hagrid's familiar voice, Harry sighed in relief. Any detention with Hagrid probably wouldn't be so bad. His relief had been spotted by Filch, however, and he was quick to give a sharp kick to it straight down the drain.

"Think you're going to have a good time with that big oaf, eh? No way, 'cause it's in the forbidden forest you're going tonight."

"Isn't it... you know... forbidden?" Blaise asked.

"Isn't walking down the halls in the middle of the night forbidden?" The man snapped mockingly back with a glare, putting poor Blaise

under the fatal danger of breath intoxication by his proximity. The girl, on the verge of collapsing, couldn't reply.

Hagrid suddenly appeared, with Fang following him closely. The giant was holding a huge crossbow in one hand and an equally large lamp in the other. A quiver full of bolts was visible at his belt. Harry started to wonder what was so dangerous in the forest that needed a man such as Hagrid to carry such a weapon.

"'Bout time yeh get here," The man said. " 'been waitin' fer half 'n hour. All righ' there, Harry, Blaise?"

"You'd better not get too friendly, Hagrid." Filch said with a sneer. "They're here to be punished."

"Is that why yer late, Filch?" Hagrid growled in anger. "'been teachin' 'em a lesson? That's not in yer job, yeh know. Yeh did yer job, I'll do mine now."

"Very well." The other man replied, his sneer clenching tighter. "I'll be back at sunrise to gather... what's left of them."

And he walked back to the castle, the dim light of his lamp slowly disappearing in the darkness.

"Um... sir? Aren't there... *things*... in the forest?" Weasley asked fearfully, clenching his still bandaged but no longer inflated right hand with the other one.

"There are things in 'ere awrite." Hagrid assured him. "But yeh'll have teh come and help meh if yeh want teh stay in Hogwarts."

Weasley, resigned, gulped loudly.

"And he's the Gryffindor." Blaise whispered to Harry, making him chuckle. Hermione shot her a dark look while Weasley hissed in anger. However, Hagrid interrupted before the fight brewing could be served. It would have to be served later as leftovers.

"Awrite, stop this right now, kids. We've got a job teh do. Listen well, 'cause what we're doin' tonight'll probably be dangerous."

The four students followed Hagrid to the edge of the forest, where they found a twisty and small dirt path leading deeper between the trees. Hagrid guided them deeper in the forest on the trail, only stopping after a short walk, near a fork. The gigantic man bent down and touched something on the ground with a grimace of disgust, before showing his fingers to them.

Covering them was a shimmering, silver liquid, almost like liquid metal.

“Yeh know what this is?” Hagrid asked.

For once, even Hermione was stumped. Odd that of all people at Hogwarts, *Hagrid* was the only one to have ever managed that nearly legendary feat.

“See this?” He asked. “That’s Unicorn blood. There’s one of ‘em that’s been badly hurt by god-knows-what. It’s the second time this week. I found one poor thin’ dead last Wen’sday. We’ve got teh find the poor beast. Maybe we’ll even have teh put it out of it’s misery.”

“And what if the god-knows-what hurt the unicorn gets us first?” Harry asked nervously.

“As long as yer with me or Fang, nuthin’ in this forest can hurt yeh.” The giant man assured. “Don’t stray out of the path. We’ll split up in two groups and follow the trail in different directions. There’s blood everywhere, it must have went everywhere since last night. Awrite. Harry, Weasley, yeh go with Fang. I’ll protect the girls.”

“Aren’t we a bit young for you?” Blaise teased playfully with a nudge at Hagrid’s knee.

The man let out a guffaw and gave a heartfelt – and backfelt as well – slap in the back of the girl, who stumbled a bit at the force.

“Well, have fun, girls. See you in the morning.” Harry said, taking Fang’s leash in his hand. The dog whined pitifully. Weasley let out an audible gulp as he realized the dog was probably like his master; big and impressive, but a big softie.

The two groups separated, heading deeper in the forest. When Hagrid's comforting presence had vanished between the trees, Harry realized how... *helpless* he was. Oh, sure, they had the big dog, but if what Fang's nervous eyes darting between the trees seemed to say, he wouldn't be able to help much, he had a good reason to feel that way.

"You think Hermione's gonna be fine?" Weasley asked.

Oh, and the other reason he wasn't too happy. He was stuck with Weasley. Couldn't he have stuck the Gryffindors together?

"Yeah, Hermione *and* Blaise are gonna be fine." Harry emphasized the name. "I'd trust Hagrid with my life."

"Geez, you got a high spot on the guy, don't you?"

"Him and the Zabini score as the three top adults of the wizarding world, in my book. They're the ones that rescued me from the Dursleys after all."

"You make it sound like it's some kind of prison."

"In some ways, it was. You're lucky, Weasley. You know that? You're lucky you have the family you do."

"Yeah right. I'll probably be the loser of the family. Even Fred and George have something on their side, they're funny. All I've got is my skill at chess."

"Think like a loser and you *are* a loser." Harry said.

"HEY!" The red-head snapped, giving the other boy a glare.

"I didn't mean it that way, it's a Slytherin saying." Harry assured quickly. "You've got to have the right attitude, or you'll never reach what you want. If you start something and you think you're never gonna make it, you lost already. And as I was saying, I'd give my fame and fortune for the family you have, and I'm not kidding. Even if I *did* end up being the youngest of an army of brothers."

“Geez, your aunt and uncle must be some pretty rotten folks.”

“In all honesty, the Dursleys are probably less wanted on this world than mosquitoes. Unfortunately they’re not as easy to get rid of though. You can’t just clap them.”

The subject closed for now, they spent nearly half an hour in silence, just following the trails of silvery-metallic blood. Fang seemed to be getting more and more excited with every spot they found.

“I think we’re getting closer.” Harry finally broke the silence.

“You mean... the unicorn? We’re on the right way?” Weasley’s voice betrayed a certain touch of panic, as if he had hoped they hadn’t been on the right trail.

“I think so. Look at Fang, if he’d be any more excited I’d be tempted to try to defuse him.”

“Defuse?”

“Muggle thing.” Harry sighed. Damn purebloods sometimes... ‘properly’ raised purebloods that is. ‘cause damning oneself is a bad habit, you know.

The path climbed steeply, leading up to a dark, misty clearing with the ground made almost entirely of twisty roots. It seemed every inch of the ground had a root in it. If not more than one. And there, near the other end of the clearing was the most disturbing sight they had ever seen.

The unicorn they had been chasing was lying on the ground, having bled to death, its pure silky white mane reflecting even more moonlight where the metallic blood drenched it. A disgusting smell of rot and something that could only be described as acidic threatened to allow Harry’s dinner to see sunlight... pardon me, moonlight, again. But that wasn’t the disturbing thing.

A dark-robed, hunched up figure was lying on top of the unicorn's carcass. Weasley let out a gasp of horror, which it had heard. Very quickly, it turned its head toward them, droplets of silver blood dripping from its chin. Harry tensed up.

That *thing* had been **drinking** the unicorn's blood.

He didn't have time for this information to reach his stomach that the creature had started advancing toward him. I write advancing, because it didn't walk, nor did it fly. It just... slid toward the two boys, who were standing, frozen in place.

And then, the pain came.

Ever known was having a knife, that must have been taken out of a burning inferno not a second ago, being planted in your forehead, then twisted around in your head, felt like? I hope not for your sake, since extracting said knife alive must have been very difficult.

That's how Harry's scar suddenly felt. Add to it a couple of burning needles with jagged edges, a dozen jackhammers with diamond bottoms and the numerous footsteps found around a female lingerie shop announcing a sale...

...erm... ok, maybe that's a bit much.

Suffice to say, it hurt a lot. So much the boy crumbled to his knees, wincing and, had it not been for Slytherin pride, weeping at the paralyzing, incapacitating feeling.

And the creature was still sliding closer. It looked like nothing would stop it from reaching the two boys...

"Stop right there, or I'll curse you!"

...until one of the two, namely Ron Weasley, stepped up between them, bravely brandishing his wand and pointing it at the creature, who didn't look phased at all, not even slowing down.

"You asked for it... Wingardium Leviosa!"

...Gotta hand it to the boy, he certainly was brave. However, bravery and courage are nothing if you don't have the right muscle, in this case spells, to back it up. The weak jinx did hit the creature, but it had absolutely no effect on it, except revealing a rippling black dome around it, for not even a millisecond.

As the creature was about to reach them, a thundering beat came to their ears. The sound of a horse. Was a teacher coming to help them? And where had that teacher found a horse?

But it wasn't a horse. Soaring over them, landing in between them and the creature before giving a powerful punch directly in its 'stomach', sending it reeling away, was a creature neither had expected to see. Its bottom half was that of a horse, but just where a horse's neck would have been was a man's body. His horse body's fur was clear and his human hair was blond.

...a centaur.

The cloaked figure, restored itself in mid-flight, but instead of pursuing its attack, it flew away in the darkness between the trees.

Harry's scar stopped burning, allowing him to look up at their savior. The centaur was still looking at where the creature had vanished to, as if expecting it to return. After a short moment, he returned Harry's look.

"Are you all right?" He asked.

"Y...Yes..." Harry managed. "Thank you for helping us."

The centaur didn't answer. He just stared at Harry with surprisingly blue eyes, both of them stopping momentarily to stare at his scar.

...and Harry started to wonder if there was a magical being who didn't know about him.

"You're Potter's son... you'd better get back to Hagrid. The forest isn't safe these days. Especially for you. You know how to do horseback riding?"

"A bit." Weasley admitted.

The centaur turned toward him, giving him an odd look.

"Any family relation to those two wild red-heads who keep trying to sneak in the forest?"

Guessing, Weasley chuckled. "They're my brothers."

"Tell them to keep their fireworks on themselves next time." The centaur's face had a small smile, as he lowered himself to let them get on. Just as Weasley helped Harry settle himself on the bumpy horse back, two new galloping sounds were heard, a second before two other centaurs appeared.

"Firenze!" The black-haired one who looked more aggressive than the other bellowed angrily. "What are you doing?! Carrying humans on your back?! Don't you have any shame? What are you, a mule?"

"You know who this boy is? It's Potter's son! The fastest he's out of this forest, the better!" Firenze, the centaur they were riding, said.

"What did you tell them?" The black-haired one started again, apparently more angry than before. "Remember that we've vowed not to go against the sky's decision. Did you not read in the planet's movements what must happen?"

"Calm down, Bane." The other one, much calmer and more composed, said. "I'm sure Firenze thought he was doing good."

"Doing good?!" Bane, the black-haired one, roared, hitting the ground with his hoof. "What is our business in all of this? Us centaurs willingly submit to destiny's whim. WE don't have to run around like donkeys to find humans lost in the woods!"

Getting angry himself, Firenze started kicking, nearly toppling to two boys.

"Don't you see this unicorn?" He bellowed at Bane. "Don't you understand why it was killed?! Didn't the stars reveal you this secret?"

I'm standing up against what's hiding in this forest, Bane. Even if I have to rely on a human's help to do it!"

Firenze suddenly dashed in a quick gallop, once again nearly making the two boys fall. For a while, Harry could only see trees passing by, and feel the rumble of the horse body beneath him. He clearly wished the ride would end soon, because the feeling wasn't fun... it was downright painful.

"Why was Bane so pissed? Is it because you helped us against that... *thing*?"

Firenze didn't answer. He did, however, slow down and recommend them to lower their heads, a tip that Weasley listened to only after asking "why?", receiving a low branch on his forehead as an answer and letting out some colorful expletives as a result.

"Do either of you know what unicorn blood can be used for?" Firenze suddenly asked.

"I have a feeling you'll tell us." Harry said.

The centaur had a small chuckle, giving Harry a look from over his shoulder. His face dropped back down to a saddened look as he started explaining.

"To kill a unicorn is a horrible thing." Firenze began. "To commit such a crime, one must have nothing to lose and everything to win. A unicorn's blood allow someone to survive, even if he's on the brink of death, but at a terrible price. Because you must kill a pure and defenseless creature to save your own life, the moment your lips touch the blood, you only have a half-life. A cursed life."

"Who could be desperate enough for that?" Weasley asked. "Drinking that stuff looks gross already, who'd want a cursed life on top of that? I'd rather just die."

"Someone who has nothing to lose and everything to get... could it be that that person wants the Philosopher's stone?"

"The elixir of life!" Ron gasped.

“Exactly.” Firenze said, smiling.

“But who...” Harry began, but the centaur interrupted him.

“Don’t you know of someone who’s been hanging on to life for years, just waiting for a moment to get back to his former strength?”

Harry’s insides froze faster than a 486 computer trying to run Diablo II. It couldn’t be...

“You mean... Voldemort?!” He asked his suspicions.

Weasley gasped in surprise and literally fell off his high horse, landing in a disorganized heap on the ground. Firenze skipped a step and shuddered, his body shaking underneath the black-haired boy.

“Y... yes.” The Centaur said, giving a fearful look at Harry, who grinned sheepishly.

“Sorry.” He mumbled, looking down at Ron, who was staring back with his eyes wide open.

Their detention ended soon when they found Hagrid again. On the way back, Harry gave a look at Weasley.

“You *do* know that you could have ran off and saved yourself, right? You didn’t have to stand up and try to help me out.”

“What kind of Gryffindor would I be? You might be a Slytherin, but Hermione’s right... you’re not as bad as... say... Malfoy. Plus, I was paying you back for helping around back in Halloween.”

Harry smirked. “So no more debts?”

“Nope, we’re even now.” The boy replied, returning the smirk.

Later, in the empty Slytherin common room, Harry told his tale to Blaise and Draco, who were both staring at him with eyes wide open.

“Why am I always missing everything...” Draco wondered. Harry didn’t listen to him. He was lost in his own mind, thoughts rolling around his head like lottery balls.

“Snape wants to bring the stone to Voldemort so that he can brew the elixir of life and bring Voldemort back to life... All this time, I thought Snape just wanted to make himself rich... but he *does* have the look of someone who’d serve Voldemort—”

“Stop saying his name!” Chorused Draco and Blaise.

“Firenze saved me and Ron, but I don’t think he was supposed to... Bane was furious. He said that they shouldn’t have went against what the stars were saying... they must have said Voldemort was back... Bane seemed to think Firenze should have let Voldemort kill meph..?! Mppphhh!!”

“That’s enough philosophical thoughts from you.” Blaise said, her hand blocking his mouth. “Keep this up, and you won’t be able to sleep. Just remember, Dumbledore’s here, and as long as he’s here, You-know-who can’t get to you.”

A little bit reassured, Harry nodded with a warm smile. That’s right. Voldemort wouldn’t be able to touch him as long as the headmaster was there. Now, if only they could stop Snape from getting the stone... And with those thoughts, his eyes closed and he fell into deep slumber.

Chapter 11: Let sleep the dogs of war

He simply could not believe he had managed it. Through all the academic dangers that the summer exams had proven to be, he had managed to righteously keep his title of 'the boy-who-lived' without having to change it too much; it now became closer to 'one of the many boys-who-don't-want-to-live-to-see-another-exam'.

Yes, he had passed them. The quills preventing the students from cheating didn't include copying words on already-written notes sneaked into the great hall, where the terrible monsters had been faced and defeated, and only that fact allowed Crabbe and Goyle to pass. That, and the vigorous study schedule Hermione had forced upon them.

"We saw Ronan and Bane, too," Blaise had said during the next meeting they had after their exhausting adventures in the forbidden forest. "they seemed to know Hagrid pretty well."

"Well, d'uh, taking care of nasty critters is what this guys does for a living." Draco said.

"Centaurs are *far* from being 'nasty critters'." Hermione critiqued with a glare at the platinum-haired boy. "Apart from the fact that they barely see anything that goes on down here on earth, they're some of the smartest non-human creatures on earth, just behind merpeople and vampire, but only because both races can rely on knowledge of ancient magic and past powers due to the vampire's literal immortality and the merpeople's contact with the flooded Atlantis, which is the most ancient area where magic was found, along with--"

"Very interesting..." Ron interrupted the girl-who-ate-the-schoolbooks with a careless wave, "...but let's get back to what happened yesterday."

While Hermione was giving a sour look at her housemate, the dark-red haired girl continued her tale. "Ronan ran straight up to us first. HE and Hagrid talked a while, then Ronan said something about Mars."

"Mars is easy to see tonight." Hermione quoted.

“Exactly.” Blaise acknowledged, not even pausing to wonder exactly how did Hermione remember everything so well. “And then he added something freaky... “Always the innocent are the first victims, so it has been for ages past, so it is now.””

“But what’s the connection?” Harry asked.

“Easy.” Hermione began in full dictation mode. “Unicorns are known to be one of the purest, most innocent creatures on earth and are unable to cause harm to anything. In fact, a group of them once stopped a goblin army from attacking an innocent village back in 1425 simply by being there. They say the goblins just lost their will to fight upon seeing them.”

“Ok, that I can understand...” Harry said, thinking back on how beautiful, yet how sad the downed unicorn looked in the meadow, and how the mere thought of harming such a creature made his stomach protest against the tyranny that is the process of digesting. “...but what’s up with mars? I mean... what’s a planet got to do with a unicorn?”

“I don’t think he was talking about the *planet* mars, at least, not literally. In astrology, the planet mars is usually associated with fire, the volatile element of destruction and cleansing, and war, mostly because of the mythological Greek god called Ares, or Mars in ancient Rome, which was the god of war in both pantheons. In Greek mythology, he is said to enter in a fight with his two sons, Phobos and Deimos, who are themselves the gods of fear and panic, and is described as a coward and adulterous god disliked by mos—”

“Very interesting,” Ron interrupted loudly “but back to the point please?”

“Looks a bit obvious to me.” Harry said flatly, ignoring the infuriated bushy-haired girl giving a sharp kick in the tall red-head’s shin. “‘Mars is bright tonight’, ‘Always the innocents are the first victims’ The unicorn was the first victim of Voldemort. And I don’t see much else than *him* who could be qualified as ‘god of war’.”

“Stop saying his name...” Blaise uselessly whined.

But those thoughts were almost gone from his head now, as he lay down near the lake, his back on a sturdy tree trunk. Curled up on his lap, Nemesis was whipping out his forked tongue frantically, smelling everything around them.

“Ssso good to be outssside again!” The snake said, then glared at Harry. “When I manipulated you into sssmuggling me out of that blasssted sssshop, I expected to go out a bit more!”

“Well, tough. I told you snakes weren’t allowed in school, so I have to hide you.” Harry replied. “We’re lucky no one spotted you.”

“Jussst those housse-elves who were nissse enough to feed me while my ‘oh-ssso-great’ massster went and nearly got himssself killed half a dozen timesss.”

“Look, I’m sorry about that, ok?” Harry said, feeling thoroughly embarrassed. Yes, he had quite neglected Nemesis. “To make up for it, how about I let you come to class with me next year?”

“Throw in sssome of thozzze sssuculent fried frogsss the housse-elves manage sso well and consssider it a deal.”

With a chuckle, Harry nodded. “Just make sure you stay discreet in class, though.”

“Count on it.” The snake replied. “Oh, and your friend Blaizzze is coming.”

“Quick, hide in my shirt!”

“Yesss, O, great massster of our livezzz, the one with the sssuperior power we all bow to...” Nemesis grumbled in unicorn-pure sarcasm as he hid under the wide shirt he had choose instead of the hot, heavy black robes that made the Hogwarts uniform. While very useful in the winter, they were more than too hot in the middle of the summer .

The dark-red haired girl ran up to him, looking quite out of breath as if she had ran a long distance. She, too, had dumped the Hogwarts robe in favor of a sleeveless sky blue shirt and a knee-length light grey skirt.

“What... you... doing... out here...?” She asked/panted.

“Just thinking about stuff.” He half-lied quickly and fluidly.

“About what? The forest?”

“A bit.” He admitted. “And Voldemort.”

The girl shuddered, but had long since gave up on forcing him to stop saying his name. “Don’t worry, Snape doesn’t know how to get past Fluffy yet. There’s no need to be afraid.”

“I’m not afraid, I’m just... nervous. Imagine Hagrid told him accidentally, you know how easy it is to know something from him if you have something... he.. .wan...ts... uh ho...”

Harry quickly got up and, without waiting for Blaise, started jogging toward Hagrid’s hut.

“Harry?! What’s wrong?!”

“Don’t you find it strange that Hagrid always wanted to raise a dragon and that someone who carries a dragon egg in his pocket just *happens* to walk up to him and give it to him? Do you think many people walk around carrying dragon eggs in their pockets while it’s forbidden among the wizards? Strange that he just *happens* to find Hagrid, don’t you think? I should have figured it out earlier...”

“You mean...” Blaise started, but they had already reached the wooden hut, where Hagrid was busy shelling green peas in a big bowl.

“Hey yeh two! Finished yer exams yet? Wanna drink teh it, dun’ worry, I wun’ tell yer mum, Blaise...”

“Generous, but no thanks.” Harry said. “I got something to ask you.”

“Awrite, what is it?”

“The day you won Norbert’s egg playing cards, what did the wanderer who gave it to you look like?”

“I dunno, he kep’ his hood on the ‘hole time.”

Harry and Blaise shared a worried look that did not go by the gigantic man.

“That ain’t no reason teh be suspicious,” Hagrid clarified. “There’s lots of odd chaps in that pub. Maybe he was a Drag’n seller?”

Harry and Blaise shared a look that clearly meant they thought it was exactly a reason to be suspicious.

“What did you say to him? Anything about Hogwarts?”

“Hmm... maybe jus’ a little...” the giant man replied, furrowing his eyebrows in effort, trying to remember. “Yea, that’s righ’, he asked what kind o’ job I did and I replied I was gamekeeper here... and then he wondered ‘bout the kind o’ creatures I looked after.”

“Did you talk to him about Fluffy?” Blaise asked.

“Maybe a little... How d’yeh know ‘bout Fluffy?!” Hagrid asked in shock.

Harry shrugged nonchalantly. “I heard another Slytherin saw you feed it.” It wasn’t exactly a lie. Blaise and Draco *were* other Slytherins.

“D’yeh think anyone else than yeh two know?” He asked nervously, as if not willing to trust the entire population of the Slytherin house with the secret of a giant three-headed dog protecting a stone that can give eternal life and infinite riches. Go figure why.

“Naa,” Blaise said. “We made sure that person kept quiet. No need for people to go around trying to visit it, you might get into trouble.”

Hagrid let out a sigh of relief, while Harry decided to press on. “Hagrid, this is important. Did you tell him about Fluffy?”

“Yea, well, a little. Yeh don’t see many three-headed dogs ‘round here, y’know. So, yea, I talked teh ‘im about Fluffy a bit, about what he likes to eat, and other stuff someone needs teh know teh take care ‘o one.”

“What exactly?” Blaise asked.

“Hmm... The best way teh pet ‘im, how to make ‘im exercise... Oh, and ‘ow adorable he looks after yeh play a bit ‘o music teh ‘im and put ‘im teh sleep....” Hagrid seemed to realize what he had just said and quickly panicked. “Forget I said that!”

...too late, the two Slytherins were already running away, both terrified at the ramifications of the information they had just received.

“Snape knows how to get past Fluffy!” Blaise resumed helpfully as soon as they entered the school again.

“We’ve got to find Dumbledore and warn him!” Harry said.

Both of them ran up to the closest teachers’ office, which just happened to be McGonagall’s. The woman was carrying a large load of books and parchment back inside her office, her eyes narrowing suspiciously at the two Slytherins.

“What are you two doing here?”

“We need to speak to Dumbledore quickly!” Harry said.

“Couldn’t you go to your head of house instead of me?”

“No, *he’s* the reason why we need to see Dumbledore!” Blaise snapped.

“And what might it be, pray tell?”

“Snape wants to get the philosopher’s stone!” Both of them chorused.

The load of books and parchment dropped heavily as the woman’s eyes opened in stunned surprise. Her next mumbling sounded like what one would get if one mixed the lines “How do you know about

the stone”, “Why would he want to steal it” and “You’re being ridiculous” tightly together in one single line.

Finally, she regained her wits and glared angrily at the two. “What do you two think you’re playing at?!” She snapped, much to their surprise. “Trying to get a member of the staff in trouble again, are you? Twenty points from Slytherin for each of you for wasting my time, and you’d better go away before I really get angry!”

“B...But...” Blaise stuttered, before Harry grabbed her arm.

“Come on, this is useless.” He said, before guiding her out of McGonagall’s earshot. Once arrived, he turned toward her, his green eyes very serious.

“This is very bad. Blaise, you go find Ron and Hermione. I’ll get Draco. We’ll meet up in the usual spot.” He commanded, waiting for the acknowledging nod, before they split up.

Ten minutes later, in the empty classroom on the third floor that had become their rendezvous point, the two Gryffindors and three Slytherins were packed together, sitting on wooden chairs that had probably seen better days.

“Snape knows how to get past Fluffy.” Harry announced with as much subtlety and tact as a falling anvil.

The reaction was almost funny. Eyes wide open, mouths agape, everyone were stunned in horror. Had the situation not been as bad, Harry might have laughed.

“Oh... my... god...” Hermione eloquently mumbled.

“Why didn’t he act yet?” Draco asked.

“He’s probably waiting for the closing feast,” Blaise reasoned. “When everyone’s going to be in the great hall and nobody will notice him sneaking out with the stone.”

“Unless the stone isn’t there for him to grab.” Harry continued. “Then he’d be in a lot of trouble. I’m going down the trap door tonight.”

Silence welcomed his announcement. For a good minute and a half, nobody made a single noise, almost as if someone had put stop on the VCR. Oh, wait... ok, never mind, my fault. There, play.

“How... Gryffindorish.” Draco said.

Harry gave him a look. “Any better ideas? It’s not like we can ask *our* head of house, *he’s* the one we’re trying to stop.”

“I still don’t think it’s him.”

“Shows how blind even *Slytherins* can be.” Ron hissed. “How *OBVIOUS* can you get?! Snape tried to kill him!”

“He might have been trying to save him with a spell too, you know.” Draco reminded. “And Quirrell was Jinxing Harry’s broom too.”

“He might have been the one trying to save Harry, he *is* the defense against the dark arts teacher. It’s his job to know stuff like that.” Blaise reasoned.

Draco shrugged. “Believe what you want, we’ll see in the end who’s right.”

“Calm down, both of you!” Hermione snapped. “Acting like children like that, shame on you, Ron!”

“W...Why me!” The red-head protested.

“You started it.” Hermione reminded, then turned to Harry. “Got a plan?”

“Sure I do!” Harry said, taking an important air. “What kind of Slytherin would I be if—”

“I think she means a plan outside of “Go in, get the stone, get out”, Harry.” Blaise quipped.

At Harry's silence, Hermione sighed. "Thought so. Might as well plan it, we don't want to get caught tonight."

"We?" Harry asked.

"What, you didn't think we'd let you go down there alone, did you?" Blaise asked, her arms going around his neck in a playful headlock. "Forget it, Harry Potter. If you're kicking ass, then I want in."

Harry chuckled a bit as he gave up, knowing he wouldn't be able to dissuade his friends from coming – and certainly not because of Blaise's hold over his neck.

After the plan was made by Hermione – good insurance that it's a good plan – the five students went to their respective common rooms. Harry, Draco and Blaise sprawled themselves down on the couches in front of the fire.

Soon enough, the curfew was about to fall. Harry and Draco made it look like they were going to sleep to everyone, climbing up the stairs of the boys dormitories. Blaise said she'd stay up a bit longer for some curse 'n hex checking up, a perfectly valuable Slytherin outer-school studying reason.

The two boys gathered Harry's cloak, which was neatly folded on Harry's bed and ready to use already, courtesy of Crabbe and Goyle, who were already snoring... nay, 'Hogwarts-express'ing away. The flute Hagrid had gave Harry for Christmas was on top of the cloak.

Harry took the cloak, pocketed the flute and nodded at Nemesis, who sneaked into his sleeve without Draco noticing.

"So far so good." Harry said, making sure the cloak was hiding his open sleeve in which the snake was still sliding.

"Yeah." Draco replied, oblivious. "We'd better hurry before Snape finds Blaise though."

After making sure Nemesis was well hidden, Harry threw the cloak over the other boy and himself. Together, they walked down the stairs, made their way through the last few Slytherins left toward the couch and, without removing the invisibility cloak, Harry gently touched Blaise's shoulder.

Blaise took that moment to look in her bag, theatrically gasp and quickly stride out as if she had forgotten a book somewhere, knowing she was being followed by Harry and Draco under the cloak since the black-haired boy had never let go of her shoulder. .

Once the door was closed and they had made sure nobody was looking, the two boys slipped the girl under the cloak as well.

"I still don't understand why we had to sneak out of our *own* common room."

"We *did* make Slytherin lose a lot of points, Blaise." Harry reminded. "They wouldn't have let us out if they had seen us."

"Maybe you two, but not me." Draco said smugly, as he was the only one who hadn't made them lose any points.

"Malfoy, shut up." Blaise snapped in anger. "I'm lucky mom didn't send me a howler for that."

"Shut up both of you..." Harry hissed as they rounded a corner. "...you'll get us caught."

The next stop was the fat lady's portrait, the entrance to the Gryffindor common room in which Ron and Hermione were waiting for them. Unfortunately, there, they encountered the first problem.

"What's the password?!" Draco hissed, hoping not to wake the fat lady up.

When she was still snoring, Harry turned to Draco, pointing at the side of the portrait.

"They made sure to keep it a bit open, but if we open it wider she'll notice and warn Filch or something." He said.

Sure enough, the hole was open, but only enough for a fist to barely make it through.

"That's bloody brilliant, how are we supposed to get *through* that?!" Blaise hissed angrily.

"Not *us*." Harry replied, lifting his arm. "*He* will."

"I sssinssserely hope you know what you're doing..." Nemesis hissed.

Ignoring him, Harry lifted his sleeve, revealing the snake tightly curled around it. Blaise had to put two hands in front of her mouth to stifle her shriek of surprise.

The fat lady mumbled something about long-haired red-head boys and their girlfriends sneaking out at night.

Harry guided Nemesis inside the opening, in which the snake barely got through. While he was in no way big, he still had a considerable size to himself.

"What do we do now?" Draco asked.

"Now, we wait. He'll be back soon enough." Harry replied.

"What was that thing anyway?" Blaise asked.

"That was Nemesis, my pet snake. I... erm... *He* found *me* at Diagon alley."

"Wait... that means you brought that thing in *my* house?! What if it had bit some--"

"We'll talk about this later." Draco interrupted, giving a worried look at the fat lady.

The two other Slytherins nodded, Blaise giving a look that clearly said 'Count on it' or something along the lines of that.

Harry pressed his ear to the opening as he began to hear voices.

“How in the world was I supposed to know he’d send a bloody *Snake* to find us?!” Ron’s voice, unmistakable, said rather loudly. Harry groaned.

‘Keep it up and we won’t even *GET* to the bloody trap door!’ Harry thought furiously.

“I’ll let you know I am sssertainly *not* bloody. I’m quite clean, akshually.” Nemesis’ voice said.

“You could at least tried not to shriek that way. We’re lucky we were alone in the lavatory, otherwise you’d have stilled the whole tower awake.” Hermione scolded.

“Ickle Ronniekins had a scare?” Draco said in a bit of a sing-song whisper.

Suddenly, another, unexpected voice came form the other side.

“What are you two doing?”

...It was Longbottom.

Their whole plan, made and fool-proofed by miss Hermione ‘The girl-who-read-in-her-sleep’ Granger herself, was about to be thwarted by Neville ‘He-who-must-not-be-kept-close-to-cauldrons’ Longbottom.

“We’re... um... just going to take a walk...” Weasley said lamely, his voice turning into a hiss of pain as Hermione *probably* stomped on his foot for his stupidity.

“If you go out, you’ll get caught again, and Gryffindor’s going to get in even more trouble.”

“But it’s *very* important, you don’t understand...” Hermione began, but was stumped when Longbottom placed himself in front of the hole, preventing the Slytherins from seeing anything anymore.

"I.. I won't let you leave!" He said, growing a backbone in the space of a second. "I'll even fight!"

"My, Longbottom, you surprise us..." Draco mumbled with heavy sarcasm. "Look at this wimp's knees... Shaking like Puffskeins."

"Don't be stupid, Neville! Let us through!" Ron snapped.

"Don't call me stupid!" the plump boy snapped back.

"Yeah, it's an insult to all stupid people in the world." Draco whispered to Harry, who barely stifled a snort.

"You two have done enough forbidden things! And you said it yourself I should defend myself!" Longbottom said at Weasley, who looked like he wanted to slap his forehead in annoyance.

He let go of his toad and lifted his hands in a defensive position.

"Try to hit me!" He challenged.

"I told you to defend yourself, but *not* against *us*!"

"What are you, a chicken? Fight me!"

"Geez, he's really asking for it, isn't he." Blaise noted dryly.

"This will be the first and only time I say this in my entire life." Draco said solemnly, before launching a flat: "Go Weasley." That left the two other Slytherins totally stunned.

The two Gryffindors were just as stunned. Hermione looked like she was about to get her wand and curse the boy, but the last thing she wanted was to miss and hit the fat lady, which would probably wake her up.

“Hmm... looksss tasssty...” A voice came to Harry’s ears.

Longbottom seemed to notice it. He looked down and saw the red-and-green-on-black scaled snake turning around his feet, whipping it with it’s forked tongue. With a shriek of fear, Longbottom jumped away from the hole. Hermione was quick to lift her wand and cast “*Petrificus Totalus!*” on the boy, trapping him on the ground like he was bound by ropes.

“Sorry Neville,” she said apologetically, looking down at him. “but it’s for a good reason. You’ll understand later.”

“C’mon, Harry’s probably waiting for us.”

Longbottom’s eyes widened in surprise and betrayal, as if teaming up with the Slytherins was a mortal offense.

After going through the portrait hole, managing not to wake the fat lady up, the five students, walking hunchbacked so the cloak would hide their feet as well, made their way to the third floor’s forbidden corridor. There, they removed the cloak.

“Finally...” Blaise sighed. “Damn that Longbottom for almost screwing everything up!”

“By the way,” Ron said, turning to Harry and looking at Nemesis, who was curled up around Harry’s sleeve. “what in Merlin’s beard *is* that thing?”

“A snake.” Draco said helpfully, receiving a glare from the red-head.

“His name’s Nemesis.” Harry said. “Don’t worry, he doesn’t bite.”

“Oi, ssstop that, you’ll wreck my reputashhion.”

Harry chuckled and flicked his finger at the snake's head, who barely dodged.

"Um, guys, we got a problem." Hermione said.

She pointed at the door, which was usually locked firmly, usually closed and needed a spell to open.

...and it wasn't locked.

It was even open a bit.

The five looked at each other fearfully.

"He... couldn't possibly have..." Blaise started, voicing everyone's fears.

The black-haired boy turned toward Draco.

"Go warn Dumbledore."

"Why me?" The platinum-haired boy asked.

"Well, you're the only one of us who hasn't got into trouble already, your dad's high-rank in the ministry so you're not likely to be expelled and, lastly, I know how much you hate heroics." Harry listed.

Draco shot him a sour look and took out his hand.

"The cloak."

"I knew you'd see it my way." Harry smiled, handing the boy his cloak.

When Draco was gone and his footsteps had vanished, Harry pulled out the flute and put it to his lips, getting ready to play it. Ron went to the door side and, swiftly, opened it.

Fluffy's six eyes whipped open in surprise, locking into the four eleven years olds who were trying to invade his abode. Sensing a midnight snack, the three heads licked their chops in anticipation.

...that is, until the music started to play.

It wasn't really a melody, neither a music, nor was it beautiful to hear. But as soon as the first notes started playing, the gigantic, three-headed dog's eyes started to drop with an lamenting whine. It was almost comical, as if it was saying 'Aw, not *again...*'.

Wasting no time, Ron, Hermione and Blaise ran to the trap door and opened it while Harry struggled to keep making good notes. The dog seemed to growl a bit more with every squeak or screech the flute made. The hole beyond the trap door was pitch-black. It didn't seem to have a bottom. There wasn't any ropes or ladder either. It looked like they would have to jump.

"Who goes first?" Ron asked.

Harry tapped his shoulder, then pointed at himself.

"You want to go?" Hermione asked.

"Gimme the flute." Blaise said. "I'll keep playing while the rest of you jump in."

Harry made a countdown on one hand while the other pressed the holes in the flute. When it reached zero, he quickly gave the flute to Blaise and jumped down while the dog started to wake up.

"I should have known, I've never been able to play a single note on anything."

"Bloody hell!" Harry thought, remembering their last Christmas.

Sure enough, an ear-shattering squeak came from above. However, instead of the furious growling and agonized screams he had expected, there was only a loud, triple, canine cry of pain. The fall seemed to last an eternity, but when it finally ended, it was on something soft and squishy that absorbed his fall. He felt rather relieved that no sound came from above anymore, except furious

shouting that sounded a lot like Blaise and laughter that could only be Ron's.

"You alright, Harry?" Hermione's voice asked, yelling above the laughs.

"Yeah, there's something soft down here, it's safe to jump!" He yelled back up at the small spot of dim light in the ceiling.

Not a ten seconds later, three other shapes fell from the roof – Blaise not without a squeal that would have been more welcome in an amusement park – and landed in the... whatever it was.

"You should have seen it, it was hilarious!" Ron said with a grin, still laughing. "Fluffy just ran off to the other side of the room as soon as she started to play, like it had just been scolded or hit with the daily prophet!"

"Oh, shut up!" Blaise snapped in anger, her cheeks pink.

"What did we land on?" Hermione asked, looking down at the plant.

"Looks a bit like a plant..." the dark-red haired girl said, apparently glad someone changed the subject.

"Well, good thing it's here." Ron noted, patting it.

"Good thing?! Look at yourselves!!" Hermione screeched, getting up and jumping away, not without difficulty.

The plant's long tendrils were ensnaring them, Harry realized with a start as he tried to move his legs, but was unable to.

The bushy-haired girl stared in horror as the three other first years struggled against the tendrils. But the more they fought, the more it entangled them.

"Stop moving!" She snapped. "I know that plant, it's a devil's snare!"

“Oh thanks for the information, really helpful!” Ron said sarcastically, trying to stop the plan from strangling him.

“Yeah, at least now we know what’s gonna kill us!” Blaise added in the same tone, her only free leg kicking unsuccessfully at the vines holding the other while her two arms were already stuck.

“Quiet, I’m trying to remember how to kill it.” Hermione snapped, looking like she was deep in thoughts.

“Well hurry up, that thing’s strangling me...” Harry wheezed as the monster squeezed his chest.

“The Devil’s snare... what did Professor Sprout say about it already? It likes wet and dark places...”

“So light a fire!” Blaise said.

“Yeah, but we don’t have wood...” Hermione said.

“WHAT ARE YOU, DENSE?!” Ron bellowed. “ARE YOU A WITCH OR NOT?!”

Hermione seemed to realize what she had learned during the last nine months and, after mumbling a quick “Oops”, took out her magic wand and pointed it at the plant.

“Incendio!” She said.

The plant screeched in evident agony as an inferno burst over it. Quickly, it let go of the three first years, who quickly scampered away from the hole in which the vegetal monster was planted before they got burned by the flames, not too successfully.

“Hermione, there is such a thing called control.” Harry noted dryly, patting the last few flames from his sleeves while Nemesis complained loudly about ‘Anguicidal pyromaniac witches’.

The bushy-haired girl’s face flushed in embarrassment as the final flames finished the plant off.

“Oops.” She repeated.

Chapter 12: The nervous S.Quirrell

Fluffy was *not* having a nice day. First, some tasty-looking snack-on-legs dressed in a black cloak walked right in his private room which that nice big man gave to him as started playing with a harp. The next thing he knew, he was waking up because the door was opened again, this time with four smaller snacks. It was even better; the three heads would be satisfied and they would have the share the last one.

Only one of them, who had black fur that looked like a hurricane had gone through it, started playing with that flute, putting him back to sleep. He knew he hadn't slept a long time when he woke up, since he didn't feel groggy at all. Three of the snacks were still there, and the trap door was open.

"Oh well, three snacks, three mouths" he thought as he was about to attack.

However, one of the shapes, who had dark-red fur and brown eyes, had brought the flute to her lips and took a deep breath. He had expected to be brought back to sleep.

...how wrong he had been.

The very worst cacophony he had ever heard had shattered his six eardrums at that moment. Rusty nails scratching at blackboards, a mountain of shattering glasses, that red-head prefect of Gryffindor's singing voice, nothing he had ever found disgusting or painful ever came close to it. Fearfully, tail between his legs, he had run as far as he could from that banshee's scream, for once wishing he had more than two front paws to block out the noise for his two other heads.

By the time his ears had stopped ringing... pardon me, gonging, it was already too late and his snacks were gone. Screams came from below the still open trap door, followed by a pillar of smoke that hurt

his nostrils as well. With an annoyed growl, the dog smashed the trap door closed again, settled down and went to sleep again, hoping that the next intruder would AT LEAST be able to play decently.

The snacks in question, who bore the names of Harry, Ron, Hermione and Blaise were walking in a dirt tunnel heading deeper into the earth. The two boys and the dark-red haired girl all had burn marks on their clothes and the boy-who-almost-turned-into-a-fried-chicken even had soot on his face.

“A simple *Lumos Solem* could have done the trick, Hermione.” Blaise scolded. “No need to overkill it with *Incendio* and almost take *us* with it.”

“Look, I said I was sorry already!” The other girl snapped, flushed in embarrassment. “And it’s your fault for giving me that book on hexes and curses.”

“Quiet!” Ron said. “I think I hear something.”

The group fell silent and listened. Sure enough, there was something ahead, a random and disorganized rustling accompanied by occasional metallic ticks.

“Sounds like the great hall during dinner time.” Blaise noted. “Without the voices.”

“Sounds more like wings to me.” Harry quipped.

Soon enough, the next room came to their eyes. It was a very tall, bright and quite large room with no features except a wooden door on the other side with a pair of gargoyles surrounding it and lots of birds flying overhead, creating the noise.

“Do you think they’ll attack us if we try go get through?” asked Ron.

“What do you think, they’ll invite us for tea?” Blaise replied sarcastically. “course they will.”

The four students stayed safely in the doorway, staring at the birds and the door on the other side. After defeating a monster like Fluffy, it just seemed silly that something as simple as a flock of birds could stop them.

“So,” Harry began after a good minute of silence. “who goes first?”

There was a moment of silence in which everyone stared at the same person for different reasons, each of them valid. Either self-preservation, which is a *very* good reason, preservation of the only one with ‘experience’ fighting their current enemy or simply for cause of chivalry.

“W...Why me?!” Ron asked, feeling utterly despaired. Even *Hermione* had picked him.

“We need Harry to fight You-know-who later,” Blaise said evenly “and you can’t send a *girl* out there.”

“Why not?” Ron asked, crossing his arms stubbornly.

“I thought you Gryffindors were the chivalrous ones.” Harry said with a sly grin.

“Sure we are!” Ron said, swelling his chest in what he *hoped* was an imposing way.

“And the brave ones?”

“Certainly!” This time, the boy lifted a fist, pumping his muscles.

“And brave people aren’t afraid of danger, right?” Harry said.

“Sure, why should we be?!” The boy boasted.

With a victorious grin, Harry pushed Ron ahead, into the room, with an encouraging “Knock ‘em dead.”

And only now did Ron realize he had been tricked. Cursing all Slytherins, Ron did the only thing that seemed right at the time. He closed his eyes and ran, expecting to be attacked by the hundreds of birds flying in the room at the same time, to feel the pain of being pecked into submission by the small, flying attackers, the noise of their furious chirping as they pulled and tore through his clothes and skin, the dull pain of hitting a wooden object nose-first...

...eh?

Ron opened his eyes in surprise, rubbing his hurt nose and sore bottom with a wince of pain. He had ran right through the room and straight into the door, before rebounding and landing on the said lower part of his anatomy.

He gave a look behind him. The birds were still flying around endlessly, just as they had before. Harry, Hermione and Blaise were simply walking toward him, the red-head girl evidently stifling laughs with very limited success. If anything, it made him feel worse.

"Well, that was anti-climatic." Hermione noted flatly.

"Ok, so the birds aren't there to attack us." Harry guessed. "Let's try to open the door."

The door, predictably enough, was locked.

"Let me try... Alohomora!" Hermione said, tapping her wand on the doorknob. The magic sparks fizzled out a few seconds after appearing, but the spell had other noticeable effect; the door still stubbornly refused to open.

"What do we do now?" Ron asked, sitting down.

"How about we play 'shoot the birdie'?" An irritated Blaise asked, pulling a bird out of her hair. When she managed it...

...they saw what the birds really were.

Keys.

Flying keys with wings on their sides. Harry certainly wasn't surprised by the physical impossibility of this.

...heck, he had seen weirder. After seeing a chair tap-dance, a melon doing a tango with a banana – no pun intended, honest! – and Filch's relationship with Mrs. Norris, he didn't think anything short of near-death experiences could scare or surprise him anymore.

"There are brooms over there!" Hermione said excitedly, picking up the said wooden objects, but then noted with a frown that "there are only three of them..."

"So we just have to catch the right one, eh?" Harry said, grinning. "Sounds simple enough. Who wants to stay on the ground?"

"I'll do it." The bushy-haired girl said, handing the poor-quality school brooms to Ron and the two Slytherins. "I don't fancy flying on those."

"We're looking for an old-style key, preferably in silver like the lock." The Weasley boy said after examining the lock and receiving the broom.

"Just like Quidditch." Harry noted with a smirk. "And this time, I didn't take any poison and nobody's here to curse my broom."

"Yeah, but nobody's here to see it either." Blaise noted.

"Small detail." Harry said with a shrug, mounting the broom expertly. "Ugh, what an old piece of..."

"Termite shhit?" Nemesis completed quizzically on his arm, before sliding to the ground.

"Erm... What's your snake doing?" Ron asked.

"I don't think he likes heights either." Harry guessed.

"And hhyou'd better not ffforget it." The snake snapped. "Now getss that key down hhhere sssso we continue."

“Yes boss...” Harry muttered darkly, unheard by the others.

By the time Ron and Blaise lifted off, Harry was already up and looking, swirling around the flying keys his practiced eyes seeking out flashes of silver belonging to old-style keys. He had no idea how many keys there were, and hoped he would get the right one on the first try.

He found one that fit the bill, flying directly under him. His timing perfect, he swirled his broom upside-down and snatched the key, before flying back down and trying it. It was nearly twice too big for the lock.

“Hold on to this.” He said, giving the failed key to Hermione for safekeeping, before lifting off again.

Soon after he had started looking for it again, he saw another flash of silver, this time belonging to a much smaller key. Hoping it was the right one, he started chasing after it. Harry had to hand it to it, that key was quick and slick, nearly losing him twice with sharp turns that nothing short of the golden snitch could pull off. That, and it seemed to constantly be surrounded by other keys.

“C’mon, get out of the way...” He futilely snapped at the keys in the way, pushing an odd silver key with a broken wing away from his face.

...silver key with a *broken wing*?!

With the grace of a falling stone, he stopped and whirled around on the uneasy and unsteady broom. Sure enough, the key was quickly moving away from him.

“It’s that one! It’s wing’s broken!” He called to Ron and Blaise, who were both above him, chasing after the same key. Both stopped and looked down at what Harry was chasing.

If the previous key was slippery, this one was downright liquid. To Harry’s annoyance, it seemed to constantly fly twice as fast as the cumbersome broom could. Ron and Blaise’s help didn’t help either,

they were even slower than Harry, not being as practiced in pulling as speed out of a broom as him.

Twice, he had passed close to catching the darn thing. Twice, it had whirled around and evaded and twice Harry had been close to breaking the broom in anger. He was getting seriously angry at it, as if it was taunting him as well as it flew, constantly staying just an inch out of his reach while he *knew* it could go much faster.

Harry had never missed a single Snitch before. He *wasn't* going to start now.

Slytherin code of conduct rule 34: If fair means have failed you, it is time to resort to foul.

Harry whipped out his wand, pointed it at the offending key and yelled "IMPEDIMENTA!"

The key suddenly seemed like it was moving in slow motion, it's wings moving with about as much speed as Goyle on an early morning. With extreme ease, Harry picked the key up and grinned at it.

"Never piss off a Slytherin." He said to it, before noticing that the metallic tints in the room had started to get stronger.

"Harry! Look out!" Hermione gasped.

Harry looked down at her, only to see what had caused her so much alarm; the gargoyles had started to move! In fact, both of them had opened their wide, ridged wings, turned their glowing, unintelligent yellow eyes at him and opened their stone mouths armed with sharp-looking teeth. The bushy-haired girl had scampered as far as she could from the monsters.

"Uh ho..."

"Must be some kind of protection against people using magic!" Blaise guessed, flying beside him.

With a mighty roar, the two stone monsters lifted off, their wings beating simultaneously, pushing their bodies higher in the air, their clawed arms getting ready to skewer the Slytherins in pieces.

“Running would be a good idea, right?” Harry noted.

“A very good one.” Blaise agreed, before both pointed their brooms the opposite direction and flew as fast as they could from them.

THAT fit in the life-threatening category.

The two gargoyles chased after the terrorized first years, beating their wings in a fast, uneven rhythm as they flew twice as fast as the aged brooms.

“Impedimenta! Petrificus Totalus, Incendio!” Harry’s curses and hexes, which he shot backward while flying forward, simply bounced off the monsters’ thick stone skin, causing them no harmful effects.

“Harry, the wall!” Blaise warned.

The boy looked ahead, noting the quickly approaching obstacle. He gave a nod at Blaise, who nodded back.

A second before hitting the wall, the two children split up, Harry turning left so close to the wall he was running on it.

The two Gargoyles’ eyes never left Harry a single second. Both of them turned left, chasing after the boy, the spade-ended rock tail of the second one hitting the wall with enough strength to shatter large rocks off it. Unfortunately, Hermione was directly underneath.

“Look out!” Ron screamed, diving down under the rocks and pulling the bushy-haired girl out a second before she was crushed. The tip of his broom hit the rock floor and shattered, causing the two children to capsize and crash in a disorganized heap on the floor, Ron pressing the smaller girl protectively against himself.

For a while, the two of them stayed on the floor, Ron's arms still wrapped around Hermione's shape. Eyes wide open, Hermione's cheeks burned up in a furious flush, which she tried to hide by pushing away and looking at the wall on the opposite of the lanky boy. Neither had received much more than a bruise. In Ron's case, his head hurt a bit.

"Are you all right, 'mione?" He asked worriedly, his own blush exposing his freckles even more than usual.

Managing to get her blush under control, Hermione shot him a glare. "How many times do I have to tell you not to call me 'mione?!"

"Oi, I just saved your life! And that's how you repay me?"

"I would have moved out of the way, you know!" She snapped back.

"Hey, you lovebirds, a little help here!!" Harry called from above before Ron could retort, diving toward them. "Take this!"

With this as a warning, the boy threw the key at Hermione, before veering again. The two monsters flew overhead, the first's tail hitting the second's back and making it's clawed limbs touch the stone ground with a deafening crash and a raging roar.

"Quickly!" Hermione gasped, running toward the door.

Ron stared at her blankly, shook his head and muttered: "Totally nutters."

Blaise landed close to Hermione, who was fidgeting frantically with the key, trying to get it inside the lock without digging a trench in the wood, so far without success. After unlocking the door and opening it, Blaise turned around and cupped her hands around her mouth.

"It's open, Harry!" She bellowed. ***"Hurry up!!!"***

The black-haired boy nodded and, in the middle of a veer that made the claws of the first go inches from the back of his neck, gave a burst

of speed, heading straight for the door. Along the way, he picked one of the keys, ripped one of it's wings off, holding himself only with his knees, and let go of the key afterwards. Then, not changing direction, he turned toward the two speeding Gargoyles, pointed his wand at the wing.

"Engorgio!"

The wing expanded like some kind of sheet, which Harry let fly between him and the Gargoyles, who rammed directly into it and started tearing it apart. He then flew through the open doorway and landed skillfully while Blaise rammed the door closed, a second before two destructive impact sounds were heard. The monsters had rammed right into the wall and, hopefully, shattered to pieces.

"Missed me?" Harry said predictably without missing a beat, gathering Nemesis in his arms.

"Goof." Blaise scolded with a relieved smile, flicking his ear.

The next room suddenly lit up before their eyes. It was a rectangular room with, in the middle, a gigantic chessboard. The huge black pieces were on their side, with even the tiny pawns a good two feet taller than them.

"This is so silly." Blaise said, noticing the door on the other side of the faceless white pieces.

She started walking forward, crossing the chessboard with quick strides. However, a foot before breaking through the wall of white pawns, they all simultaneously revealed that they bore pairs of scimitars, two of which narrowly missed chopping Blaise's arm off.

"Erm... ok, maybe not... so silly... after all..." She corrected herself, taking careful steps backwards.

"Now what do we do?" Harry wondered.

"Looks obvious to me," Ron said. "We'll have to play chess to get to the other side."

"How do we do *that*? Those pieces are much too heavy for us to move." Blaise noted.

"You never move the pieces with your *hands*," Ron gasped like it was a sacrilege. "you just tell them where to go, that way you don't damage the pieces' animation magic."

"Yeah, whatever." Blaise said with a shrug.

"We'll probably have to play as the pieces themselves." Hermione theorized.

Ron nodded, taking a few steps forward and touching the closest black knight's side. Immediately, the piece animated itself. The horse's hooves impacted against the chessboard and the knight turned his helmeted head at Ron.

"Erm... are we going to have to join ourselves to you to get to the other side?"

The knight confirmed with a nod.

"Too bad Draco's not here, he'd beat this easy..." Blaise grumbled.

"Hey, I can beat this too!" Ron protested. "I'm the best chess player of Gryffindor!"

"Then go ahead, what do we do?" Harry asked.

Ron looked thoughtful for a moment, then turned to Hermione.

"You're a rook, Hermione, Harry, you take the bishop. Blaise, you take the queen."

"The only place appropriate for me." The dark-red haired girl flaunted with a superior smirk.

"And you?" Harry asked, ignoring his friend.

“I’ll be a knight.”

“Typical Gryffindor.” The Slytherin boy sighed.

The pieces had apparently heard, because the queen, a rook, a knight and a bishop suddenly disappeared, allowing the children to take their place.

“And now?” Blaise asked, looking at Ron, who was directly at her right.

“Now, the white pieces play.”

With a stony rumbling sound, one of the white side’s pawns advanced two steps forward.

Harry had to hand it to Ron. While his plays were much more obvious than Draco’s, who liked to trick one into overconfidence and cleverly hide his game through a mask, he certainly wasn’t a newcomer. With every piece he lost, the enemy lost another, of the same kind or of superior power. However, the white pieces were clever as well. The fact that Ron couldn’t sacrifice one of the human players also hindered him.

The white queen was especially sadistic toward their pieces, moving slowly, as if to prolong their terror before striking down and shattering the pieces with extreme brutality.

Everyone held their breath as the white queen shattered another of their pawns into rubble and dust.

“Oh no, Blaise!” Ron gasped in horror.

The queen’s new position gave her a perfect attack position toward the dark-red haired girl, who gulped as she realized this.

“Should I attack her?”

"No," Ron said. "That would leave you open to that rook over there... There's only... one way..." The boy gulped, before turning to the girl. "Blaise, after this turn, destroy the queen. After that, Harry, you move to that case," He pointed to a case that was just beside the queen. "and you checkmate that king."

"What are you doing, Ron?!" Hermione gasped.

"...what I have to." The boy said, before starting to walk... directly into the white queen's path.

The white piece turned toward Ron and started to advance. By now, they had figured out what the boy was trying to do.

"RON!!!" A very worried Hermione shouted.

Ron was staring fearfully as the queen approached. Slowly, as if relishing in the boy's terror, it lifted its stone club, bringing it down brutally against the eleven years old's skull. Then, just as roughly, she grabbed him by the cape and threw him off the board, where the rest of the defeated black pieces lay.

"That... could have been... me..." Blaise said, trembling. Then, she turned toward the queen with an irate glare.

"All right, there are a few things I can't stand. People who attack my friends, and things that indebt me. And you just did both!" She roared angrily, running toward the queen.

As soon as she stepped on the white queen's space, the piece started its trek toward the white pieces' graveyard.

"Oh no you don't!" Blaise bellowed, taking out her wand. "*Impedimenta! Cremo!!*"

The slowed queen suddenly found itself bursting into fire. Should it have been organic, it would have been carbonized on the spot from the sheer heat created by Blaise's anger. However, since it was made of stone, it merely darkened, some of its parts chipping and falling on the ground.

“*DIRUMPO!*” She shouted. A ray of yellow light burst out of her wand and smashed into the queen’s club, which shattered in pieces and exploded in a burst of ivory dusty powder.

“*EXPLODARE!*” She finished. Another ray of yellow light later, the entire statue brilliantly exploded into pieces with a deafening bang. The debris flew everywhere, thankfully hitting none of them. When the almost misty dust settled, there was nothing left of the white piece but ruins and chips of stone, some of it still falling down into the foot deep crater she had made in the rock chessboard.

“...Blaise?” Hermione gasped after a moment of silence, her eyes locked upon the pieces.

“Yeah?” The red-head asked calmly, her anger apparently satisfied.

“Remind me *never* to go on your bad side.”

“Done.” The girl said with a smile.

A turn later, with the white pieces moving a rook toward Hermione, Harry walked straight toward the case Ron had asked him to go.

“Checkmate.” He announced.

Sure enough, the king dropped it’s sword to the ground in submission.

Immediately, the three ran straight toward the black pieces’ cemetery, in which Ron was laying.

“Out of my way!” Blaise snapped at the white pawns in her path, who, had they been living, would have been classified as terrified, wisely jumped into complying, one of them going as far as tripping and landing on it’s face, in it’s rush.

Harry didn’t blame them; Blaise *could* be **very** scary.

“Is he all right?” Hermione asked once the other girl had checked up on the boy.

"He's out cold." She stated the obvious. "Other than that, I have no idea. I'm no mediwitch."

"I'll stay here." Hermione said, walking toward Ron. "In case he wakes up."

Blaise suddenly got up and stopped Hermione with her hand. "No, I'll stay here. You'll be more useful anyway, miss 'walking encyclopedia'."

The bushy-haired girl huffed a bit, but conceded. "All right, but you better make sure he's all right, ok?"

"I owe him." Blaise simply said, shrugging. "I have to repay him somehow. You two continue ahead... and give Snape a kick in the arse for me, kay?"

Harry grinned and shot her a wink "Count on it. C'mon, 'mione. Let's go."

"Oh not you too." The bushy-haired girl groaned with a sigh. "I hate that nickname."

The door led to another passage The two first years mutely walked, their steps echoing between the dark stone walls. The air was getting more humid, allowing a chill through their usually warm robes. It also carried a faint, yet easily detectable perfume of...

"Eww..." Said Harry as they crossed the door into the next room.

...troll. The creature in question was laying on the ground, defeated, a big lump on it's head betraying it had been knocked unconscious. Thankful they would not have to fight the beast, but wishing they didn't have to *smell* it, the two progressed to the next room.

"How many more do you think there is?" Hermione wondered, opening the door.

“Fluffy was Hagrid’s, the devil’s snare probably was Sprout’s.” Harry replied thoughtfully. “I’ll bet Flitwick enchanted the keys and McGonagall made the chess set. I dunno who put the troll there, probably Quirrell; it *is* a dark creature. That leaves Snape and Dumbledore.”

“So, only two more and we’re at the stone.”

“Exactly.”

Just beyond the door was another, simple square stone room with a wooden table standing in the middle, bearing many differently-shaped and differently colored bottles. On the other side of the room, a simple wooden door was innocently offering them a way out.

“It can’t be *that* simple.” Harry noted as they walked ahead, hoping to reach the next door without having to touch the bottles.

No such luck.

As soon as they reached the middle of the room, black and purple flames appeared in front and behind them respectively. They were trapped.

“Figures. I guess there’s only one thing to do then.” Harry noted as he started to examine the bottles.

Hermione looked around the room, hoping to find some kind of clue as to what they were supposed to do with the bottles; throw them on the fire? Probably not. Mix them into something that *would* douse the fire? Maybe, but that led to the problem of identifying the liquids and thinking up the correct potion; though she was brilliant, she doubted she’d be able to do all that in time.

Her eyes landed on something on the floor, a simple piece of parchment that had been evidently thrown aside. On it was written an enigma:

*Danger lies before you, while safety lies behind,
Two of us will help you, which ever you would find,
One among us seven will let you move ahead,*

*Another will transport the drinker back instead,
Two among our number hold only nettle wine,
Three of us are killers, waiting bidden in line.
Choose, unless you wish to stay here forevermore,
To help you in your choice, we give you these clues four:
First, however slyly the poison tries to hide
You will always find some on nettle wine's left side;
Second, different are those who stand at either end,
But if you would move onward, neither is your friend;
Third, as you see clearly, all are different size,
Neither dwarf nor giant holds death in their insides;
Fourth, the second left and the second on the right
Are twins once you taste them, though different at first sight.*

Hermione let out a gasp and grinned.

“That’s brilliant! This isn’t magic, it’s logic, a riddle! What a great idea, most great sorcerers have nearly no logic, they’d never be able to find the answer...”

“And something that stops *us* from stopping Voldemort is a *great* idea?”

“Not necessarily, but it’s got good intentions. Let’s see...”

“How long do you think you’ll take?”

“Not too long, hopefully... and longer if you disturb me.”

“I shall endeavor to stray from your path, o great queen of the books and mistress of logic—” He dramatically declared with a heavy tone of sarcasm.

“Did I ever tell you you’re annoying when you want?” Hermione interrupted with a glare.

“I think it’s the first time, ‘mione.”

With an annoyed growl, she made sure to ignore the boy, concentrating all her attention on the paper, looking up at the bottles

every now and then. Suddenly, a minute later, she got up and picked a small bottle up.

"That one'll get you through the flames in the front, and this one," a larger bottle was picked up "through the back."

Harry picked the first bottle and looked at it.

"There's not enough for two people." He noted.

"Well, I guess one of us will have to go alone." She said with a fearful sigh.

"I'll go. You go back and help Dumbledore get here. Hopefully I'll be able to hold Snape back long enough to save the stone until he arrives."

"But... what if you-know-who's with him?"

Harry shrugged. "I was lucky once." He said, trying not to sound as nervous as he was and managing the impossible.

Hermione suddenly bit her bottom lip, before throwing herself at Harry and hugging him with all her strength. The boy would have gasped had he been able to take a breath.

"What... 's... that for...?!" He managed.

"You're a great wizard, Harry." She assured him, teary-eyed, smiling sadly. "You'd definitely have your place in Gryffindor."

"Oi, feeling insulted here." He noted flatly, grinning and gently pushing her away. "Telling a Slytherin he'd be a good Gryffindor isn't a good way to give a compliment. But, because of the situation, thank you, 'mione."

"...didn't I tell you not to call me that?" Hermione asked with a glare, the sadness completely gone.

"Not yet." He replied with a nonchalant shrug, looking at the potion. "Are you sure it's the right one?"

“Positive.” She assured, lifting her own bottle.

“Bottoms up?” Harry asked with a wink.

The girl smiled and both took a drink simultaneously.

It was like drinking liquid ice; the unnaturally cold liquid, unlike water, didn’t cool down even inside his stomach, giving him the weirdest feeling he had ever had. Then, he suddenly felt like his whole body had been thrown in icy water. He shuddered involuntarily. In front of him, Hermione did the same, only with a high-pitched squeak accompanying it.

“You’d better get going, ‘mione.”

Hermione nodded and, just before crossing the purple flames, gave a glare at Harry.

“I told you not to call me that.”

Harry grinned and lifted his arms in defense as the girl vanished through the magically-generated inferno. He turned toward the other door, hoping that the flames wouldn’t burn him.

“Aren’t you ffforgetting sssomeone?”

“Oh! Nemesis!” Harry gasped in surprise, looking down at the snake on his arm.

“I hope you ssstill got sssome of sssat poshhhion, ‘caussse I don’t want to become sssnake ffflambé.”

Harry looked inside the bottle and nodded. “Just a drop though.”

“Shhould be enofff... I’m muchhh sssmaller than you.”

“Ok then...” He raised the potion to the snake’s mouth, allowing it to take the liquid in it’s mouth, where it was quickly swallowed.

Harry immediately felt the snake go cold and shudder rather violently.

“You all right?” Harry asked once the spasms were done with.

“I’m ok,” Nemesis assured. “we’d better go on ahead and ssstop Sssnape befffore he getsss zze ssstone.”

With a decided nod, Harry walked through the flames. Surprisingly, it felt only a bit warm, not the agonizing pain he expected to feel. Nemesis seemed fine as well, as he wasn’t screaming in pain or anything. In fact...

“Can you get a bit lower? Thissss isss comfffortable...”

...he loved it. Harry shrugged and rolled his eyes.

‘Crazy snake.’

The path through the fire was easy enough and not once did he ever feel too hot. He reached the door easily and opened it without delay, expecting anything. This was Dumbledore’s defense, after all, and who knows what ideas went through the slightly mad headmaster of the school’s mind.

...except a loony.

He had expected anything from an empty, monochrome white room to a padded cell, passing by giant worm-infested deserts – the origin of such an idea was unknown to him – and mazes populated only by children programs’ characters.

Fortunately, it wasn’t any of the above. Unfortunately, it was anything *but* what he expected.

...or rather... *who*.

“YOU!” He gasped in surprise and horror at finding who was in the next room, apparently pondering on what to do.

It was Quirrell.

Yes, you read right. Quirrell. Mister I'm-afraid-my-shadow'll-jump-out-and-strangle-me. S. Quirrell, who was now watching a familiar mirror, the only object in the otherwise plain room. The mirror of Erised.

The turbaned man looked up at Harry and frowned.

"Yes, it's me." He said calmly, without a single trace of his usual stutter. "I was wondering when you'd get here, Potter."

Pulling his wits back together from the surprise, he began analyzing his situation. Alone, with only his wand and Nemesis to protect himself against a full-grown defense against the dark arts teacher. If things got to a fight, he wouldn't stand much a chance. His best chances lay into delaying things until Dumbledore arrived, when he would have a much better chance.

And based on the way Quirrell was staring at the mirror, he didn't have the stone yet.

"So, it wasn't Snape after all. It was you all along, wasn't it?" Harry started the conversation he hoped would last long enough, making sure to slowly walk around the man so that he wouldn't see Dumbledore arriving from behind him.

"Yes it was." The man confirmed with a nod, his eyes locked on the mirror. "though I must admit Severus made a perfect scapegoat, didn't he? Always swooping down on everyone like some kind of overgrown bat! Even the most famous student of his own house, who should, by all means, make him *proud*... yourself. With him around, who would suspect the p-poor, stutt-tuttering Pr-Professor Qu-Quirrell?"

Harry mentally slapped himself. He had fallen in that idiot's trap! Of course, Snape hadn't made it easy either.

"And I'll bet it wasn't him who jinxed my broom during the quidditch match, was it. It was you, wasn't it." It wasn't a question.

"Exactly. He was trying to save your pitiful life with a counter-curse... he would have failed, too, if your Mudblood friend Granger hadn't

distracted me in her attempt to set fire to Snape's robe... an excellent attempt, by the way. You'll have to congratulate her."

"I'll pass the message." He noted flatly.

By now, he was on the other side of the room. Quirrell was in between him and the only door. While it was risky and diminished his chances of escape, if Dumbledore arrived he would at least have the advantage of surprise.

Where was Dumbledore anyway? What was taking Draco so long?!

"I guess Draco was right about you." Harry said after a moment of silence. "He saw right through you."

"Yes, he did. I expected no less of him." Quirrell said with a shrug. "After all, his father and Severus are long-time friends. It's doubtless they knew each other even before young Malfoy entered the school."

That was news to Harry. Draco's Potter-hating father was friend with Snape?

'Somehow, I'm not surprised.' He thought flatly.

"What about Higgs?" Harry asked again.

"I have no claim to his actions, he did it all by himself. Very promising young student, don't you think? Truly an example of a Slytherin mind in action. *"Those cunning folks use any means to achieve their ends."*, as said by the sorting hat itself."

"Not really, a real Slytherin mind would have passed on the blame on someone else." Harry noted. As said in the Slytherin code of conduct: If someone must be blamed, make sure it's not you.

"Indeed." Quirrell agreed nonchalantly, his eyes going from the mirror to Harry. "And as a Slytherin yourself, aren't you interested in the possibilities that the stone offers?"

“Infinite money and immortal life, eh?” Harry said, looking rather thoughtful. It wasn’t quite an act; he *was* thinking of what he’d do with something like that in his hands.

“Exactly... and I’d be willing to share it with you, if you help me find it.”

Harry’s thoughts went straight to what would happen if *Quirrell* got the stone. Not wanting to make false assumptions, he asked.

“What would *you* do if you had it?”

Quirrell actually looked thoughtful at that one, giving Harry a calculating look.

“I would bring back my lord and master to his full power, where you and I could *both* have our places at his sides...”

“And that master wouldn’t happen to be Voldemort, right?”

“Who else?”

‘I dunno, I was thinking of the energizer bunny.’ Harry thought sarcastically. “And what insurance do I have that he wouldn’t try to kill me as soon as he came back?” He wasn’t really thinking about letting Quirrell have the stone, and even less Voldemort. But since playing along served his purposes, delaying him, he was willing to act the part.

“He always reward the ones who serve him well.” Quirrell said, as if it assured Harry’s survival. After all, *he* was the reason Voldemort was *gone* in the first place.

He pretended to give it a thought, while in fact his mind was already set on ‘no chance in hell’. Meanwhile, Quirrell had turned back to the mirror and was contemplating on what to do.

“What do I do with that... I can see myself giving the stone to my lord, but it doesn’t tell me at all where it is...”

Harry realized Quirrell had no idea what the mirror of Erised did. Might as well keep him in the dark, he reflected, as the longer he took, the better. Might as well distract him further.

"I've been wondering something... if you're the one trying to steal the stone, quite unsuccessfully so far I must admit," he said with a sarcastic tone "why does Snape look like he hate me that much?"

"Why? Don't you know? He *does* hate you. He was in school at the same time as your father. They hated each other like the plague."

Harry tensed up. Again, that was news to him. Snape had been at Hogwarts at the same time as his father?

"I guess Potter's claim was true, there really is a daredevil gene in the family." Snape had said, just before Harry had been tested to play as Seeker. He mentally whacked himself for missing it.

Harry reminded himself of his goal. Hoping it would distract Quirrell like such a line usually distracted the servants in TV shows, he asked:

"How is it, serving Voldemort?"

After the shudder that went through the man's body at hearing the name, he turned around and smiled a bit. "Why? Interested?"

"I'd like to keep every path available." He lied convincingly, smiling back. However, it was because he had pulled Quirrell's attention from the mirror to himself

"You live with your muggle relatives during the summer, don't you?" Quirrell asked.

"Hopefully not anymore." Harry replied truthfully, his eyes not leaving the man's for half a second. He even tried to blink at the same time as him.

"Wouldn't you like to have the chance, the opportunity to take your revenge against them? To humiliate them as they humiliated you?"

"I must admit it's tempting." Once again, Harry was truthful. He certainly would like to have such a chance, but not at the price of serving his parents' murderer.

Satisfied by his answer, Quirrell continued. "Serving my lord would grant you that... it's the greatest feeling of power... of control... you feel like you can do anything if you decide to."

"And where did you first come into his service?" He asked, feigning growing interest, while in fact it was his disgust that was doing a convincing imitation of a growing vine on steroids.

"In my travels around the world. Back then, I was a young, stupid man,"

'Whereas you're an *old* and stupid man now.' Harry thought.

"filled with ridiculous ideas on the notion of good and evil. Lord Voldemort showed me how wrong I was... he showed me there's only power, and those too stupid to look for it. Since then, I've been serving him loyally, although I *did* do a few mistakes and he had to punish me... He doesn't forgive mistakes easily," Quirrell started again, this time his voice more shaky. "But he rewards greatly if you serve him right."

Hearing the man talk about Voldemort was like hearing a dog about his master, eager to be rewarded a cookie. Harry felt physically sick.

To his horror, however, Quirrell turned back to the mirror and started looking again. Hoping to distract him again, Harry jumped on the first subject that came to his mind.

"And what does he ask you to do?"

"For now," Quirrell said, looking at the mirror more intently than ever before "he asked me to bring the stone back to him, which I will as soon as I break this mirror's secret." his eyes left the mirror to give him a glance "If you help me, I'll give a good word to him about you..." he said, as if talking about a regular job's recommendation. Again, Harry felt sick.

Not answering, Harry watched as the man started pacing around the mirror, muttering "Is it inside? Should I break the mirror?"

At that moment, Harry decided. Voldemort was too disgusting to be allowed to live. The thing he wanted the most, he quickly realized with a shock, was to find the stone and get it to the safety of Dumbledore. Therefore, if he looked inside the mirror, he would probably see himself find the stone and take it away.

Harry decided that the best way to delay him, for now, was to find the stone himself. It was evident Quirrell wouldn't take very long now. Stealthily, he started to walk back toward the mirror, taking slow, measured steps while Quirrell was too absorbed in it to pay attention to him.

He managed to look inside the mirror, only to see himself. Only himself. For a moment, nothing happened, but then the Harry inside the mirror winked at him and dug into its pocket, finding the stone there. Then, it replaced it in its pocket, and Harry felt a sudden weight in his own.

...he now had the Philosopher's stone.

"How does this mirror work? What is its secret... Master, aid me!" Quirrell called.

To Harry's surprise and horror, another voice, a hissing, high-pitched voice that sounded terribly familiar replied, a voice that seemed to come *from Quirrell*.

"The boy has it... the boy has it...!" It said.

Quirrell turned toward Harry and grinned. "Really? Where was it?"

"Oh, it was easy to get, really." Harry said truthfully, ignoring the sudden twinge of pain in his scar and giving an odd, calculating look at Quirrell. "So Voldemort is here, eh?"

"He never leaves me." Quirrell assured, pointing at his turban, his demented grin still planted on his face.

The voice rose again. "Let me speak to him." It hissed slowly.

"But... master, you're not strong enough..."

"I'm strong enough for this." Lord Voldemort's voice assured.

"V...Very well." Quirrell said, his hands going for his turban, which he started to undo. Had things been different, Harry would have laughed at the bald head of the man. However, he didn't have time to, that the DADA teacher turned around, revealing the back of his head...

"Harry... Potter..." Voldemort hissed, his red-eyes glittering in homicidal rage.

The boy barely stifled a gag. Pasty-white in color, with two vertical slits as nostrils, the snake-like face of Voldemort was fused to the back of Quirrell's head!!

'This is disgusting... no way in *hell* I'm giving the stone to those freaks!' Harry thought in outrage.

"See what I have become? Vapor and shadow... I only take shape sharing someone else's body. Fortunately, there are always a few who are willing to have me in their hearts and heads. Unicorn blood has strengthened me these last weeks... you have seen Quirrell drink some for me, in the forest. And once I have the stone and it's elixir of life, I'll be able to create a body for myself and come back to my full power..."

Harry struggled to steady his breath and calm himself; being panicked would only act in *his* favor. Now, if only he could kick out those iron-booted tap-dancing leprechauns out of his scar...

"So, all you need is this, eh?" Harry said, taking the stone out of his pocket.

It was a small, blood red crystal that looked rather normal. It's powers were rather unbelievable, he had expected a bit more.

"Yesss..." Voldemort hissed, his eyes fixated on the stone. Quirrell took a few steps backwards to get them closer to him. "Now give it to

me... and I will forgive your crime and grant you a pass by my side..."

For a moment, Harry wondered if he was talking to a snake again. He assessed his situation again;

- 1) He had the philosopher's stone.
- 2) He was very much cornered. The door was too far for him to reach before Quirrell could catch him.
- 3) Voldemort was approaching and would be catching the stone anytime.

Knowing this, Harry decided to end this game. Dumbledore would obviously not arrive in time.

"As tempting as the offer is," Harry declared in a drawling voice that sounded an awful lot like Draco's, "I'm afraid I must..." He lifted the stone high above his head, getting ready for the next part. "DECLINE!"

And he threw the stone with all his strength down, shattering it in a million of blood red pieces on the stone floor.

"NOOOOOOOOOO!!!" Voldemort roared. "KILL HIM!"

As if reacting to Harry's rage, the boy's scar suddenly started burning, as if someone was trying to tear his face in two apart with tweezers and a laser cutter.

Quirrell spun around, brandishing his wand. By now, he was only two feet away from Harry. If he decided to curse the boy, he would have no time to move out of the way. Not that Harry could move at that moment, being blinded by the agonizing pain going through his forehead.

"AVADA..." Quirrell began, but Harry's sleeve suddenly moved and, as quick as a blur, Nemesis leaped out like a spring, biting into the freak's arm.

A second later, the snake's tail whipped around Quirrell's arm. His efforts to take the snake off were fruitless; Nemesis tightly constricted around its target...

Quirrell's resistance became more frantic, more panicked. "No wait, stop—" and a stomach-churning crack was heard as the arm suddenly seemed to shrink. Quirrell's arm had snapped. In his pain, he dropped his wand and let out an agonized scream.

A roar of "STUPEFY!" suddenly came from the door, along with a crimson bolt of lightning that rammed straight into Quirrell, throwing him off his feet in a wild spin, where he landed, unconscious, face down. Voldemort's head gave a death glare at Harry, and suddenly Quirrell's body burst into flames.

"I'll be back, Potter!" Lord Voldemort hissed as he disappeared in flames and smoke.

When the flames subsided, all that was left of Quirrell were a bunch of Human-shaped ashes. The burning on Harry's forehead quickly dimmed as the dark lord left. When it was nearly gone, the boy suddenly remembered something.

"Nemesis!!" He gasped in horror, staring at the pile of dust.

"Are you referring to that thing, Potter?" A familiar voice said. But not the voice he expected to hear.

It was Snape.

"P—Professor!" He stuttered in surprise. "Where's Professor Dumbledore?"

"Imagine mister Malfoy's surprise when he discovered Headmaster Dumbledore had been urgently called by the ministry and had to leave without notice. He did the next best thing and called for his head of house, *me*." He explained. "And your... Nemesis wouldn't happen to be that, would it?"

Harry looked down at Snape's feet to find a familiar shape, unmoving, twisted in loose coils.

“It received the backlash of my Stupefixion hex. I’m afraid it won’t be much of a companion until tomorrow.”

Harry sighed in relief, cradling the snake in his arms.

“We’ll talk about the fact that you’re *not* allowed a snake for a pet later.” Snape announced, looking around the room “I see you once again ignored the rules and decided to take matters into your own hands, Potter.”

Harry gulped. Uh-ho...

“However, it seems that, for once, that daredevil gene of yours came to good use. You certainly... *protected* the stone.”

As he said that, he gave a look at the remains of the philosopher’s stone, which were silently floating in a small puddle of glittering, red and unrecognizable liquid.

“Breaking it seemed like a good idea at the time.” Harry admitted, before letting out a yawn that would have made a hippopotamus proud. The adrenaline gone, he suddenly realized his body was protesting against his every movements.

Seeing how tired he was, Snape looked at his watch, before sighing. “that’s what you get for staying up all night, Potter. Come on, let’s get you to the infirmary.”

And the last thing he remembered was being carried out of the room, too physically and mentally exhausted to walk straight.

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Chapter 13: Veridian and Crimson

Serverus Snape was *not* happy. In fact, he was downright furious. Those who heard of him would say it was probably a normal thing. Those who remotely knew him would say it was a normal thing. Those who thought they knew him perfectly would also say it was a normal thing.

...only one person knew it *wasn't* a normal thing.

"If any student walked into this room now, your hard-earned reputation would be ruined, Serverus."

And that person just had the annoying habit to appear out of nowhere at any time, scaring the living heck out of anyone not used to it.

Fortunately, he *had* gotten used to it, up to a point where he had stopped physically jumping on the closest wall.

Not up to the point where he stopped wondering how he did it, however.

Serverus looked up from where he was, at Harry Potter's bedside in the infirmary. The boy-who-shattered-the-philosopher's-stone was sleeping soundly, physically exhausted. The first year boy *had* been up for around twenty-six hours and risked his life many, many times during the final two. He *did* deserve a break.

...not that it stopped Flint from almost breaking into the infirmary a few hours ago demanding his seeker for the game.

In their haste to get the stone, the group had unfortunately forgot there was to be a Quidditch game the next day. And now, the Slytherins' star seeker was *not* in any condition to play. The team

hadn't abandoned, however. As far as he knew, the game was still going on. And if the unconscious Hufflepuff seeker laying knocked out in a close by bed was proof of anything, it would last for quite a while.

Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of the school and closest person to Severus Snape, potion master and proud holder of the title of 'asshole of the school', sat down on a wooden chair identical to the one said asshole was already sitting on.

"Can't I be worried for our chances of winning the Quidditch cup?" Severus asked smoothly, giving a look at the man. "It's all a matter of which seeker wakes up first. I've heard of seeker races, but this is ridiculous."

Albus chuckled, his eyes twinkling in obvious amusement.

"Then you'll be delighted to hear that the Hufflepuff captain decided to give up when the Slytherin team was two hundred and sixty points ahead."

"Ah." Simply said Snape, smirking smugly. "What was our score?"

"Two hundred and sixty." Albus replied, his eyes glittering in amusement. "Quite obviously, Slytherin won the cup... again."

"Flint outdid himself this year." Severus mused with a chuckle, his eyes going back to the black-haired boy who slept on the bed before him.

For a moment, both adults were silent. No sound came in the infirmary, except the steady breathing of the boy-who-slept, the chirping of outside birds and the slight humming of the nurse carefully measuring the dosage of beetle eyes to be added in the boiling concoction at her immediate right.

"Amazing how he looks like his parents, isn't it." Albus said after a moment. It wasn't a question.

Severus nodded silently. Someone less experienced at detecting the mood of the reclusive potion master than Dumbledore would have missed the mild irritation that went through him.

“Though I must admit he *has* the looks of his father,” Albus continued, looking at the boy wistfully. “his mannerisms and attitude are definitely closer to his mother’s.”

“Potter wouldn’t have tried to manipulate Quirrell.” Serverus agreed. “He would have charged right in and hoped to break something other than his own head.”

“Yes, but miss Evans wouldn’t have been so bashful about breaking the rules, either.” Albus noted. “He is, in essence, the best of two worlds.”

“Potter’s bravery and flying skills with Lily’s mind and manipulation skills.” He said, then mused on this with a small chuckle. “Somehow, I can guess *why* he was so terrified of the boy.”

Albus, in a manner much unlike what one would expect of a man of this age, snorted and gave a smile at Serverus.

After another pause, Serverus looked up. “So what’s going to happen?”

“Harry will be fine.” Albus simply said. “I had a chat with Nicholas about the destruction of the stone. He said he had lived long enough already. He and his wife have just enough elixir left to finish up the last of their business and then... well, they will go to where six hundred years old people are supposed to go.”

“So he isn’t expelled?”

“No, in fact, he graduated ages ago—”

“I meant Harry.” Snape interrupted the old man’s amused and playful lecture with an annoyed snap.

“You’re his head of house, Serverus. Such a responsibility falls upon you. So ask yourself this: Do you judge Harry Potter did a bad enough crime to deserve his expulsion?”

“As much as I’m tempted to say no, he did.” Serverus sighed. “Three times, now, that he risked his life. I don’t need to remind you of the flying class and the troll, I presume.”

“It did not escape my mind,” Albus said, “but you can hardly blame the boy for that; all three times, he was acting on the behalf of someone else. Saving mister Longbottom’s rememberall and, at the same time, save his friend Blaise from a horrible grade, can hardly be considered selfish or worth second notice, isn’t it?”

“No.” Serverus admitted. “Not that saving the rememberall helped any, though. I noticed it never turns clear in his hands. I swear, one day he’ll forget his brain at home.”

Dumbledore chuckled and nodded slightly. “Perhaps he will. Then, Harry risked his life again to stop the troll from tragically ending miss Granger’s stay at Hogwarts, which, in my book, should earn him a medal, not an expulsion.”

Again, Snape conceded.

“And the only offense left on his back is for having stopped the comeback of the dark lord... although I must say his methods were most unorthodox.” The old man mused.

“Usually, protecting something involves keeping it in one piece.” Snape agreed with a nod.

“That is true. Yet is it something that you can put on his back, since the owner of said object would rather die than let it be used for darker purposes?”

“No.” Snape agreed, then smiled. “So he’s staying.”

“If you say so, Serverus, if you say so.”

And, as the old man got up and left, Serverus Snape wondered if the old man had really been in Gryffindor, or if he was a closet Slytherin. He gave one more look at Harry and... for the first time in years, truly smiled.

“Definitely Lily’s.” He mused in a tone not unlike pride, before rising and leaving as well, closing the curtains as he went.

==~::~==

“...I mean, he stayed up as late as us, why does he stay asleep so long?”

“Come on, Blaise, who knows what happened down there except Snape... and I still can’t believe it was *Quirrell*!”

“I told you, Granger,” the drawling voice had a very familiar sense of smugness to it “but did you believe me? No. No one ever believes me—”

“Malfoy?”

“Yes Granger?”

“Shut up.”

Harry woke up to the sound of his friends’ friendly argument over his bed in the infirmary. On his chest, the familiar weight of the asleep Nemesis. He couldn’t help the smile that peeked out of his lips and the small chuckle, that unfortunately didn’t go unnoticed.

“Oh, so you’re awake, eh, sleeping beauty?!” Blaise’s voice scolded angrily, but with a heavy dose of relief.

“How did you ever guess?” Harry asked sarcastically, opening his emerald eyes and giving her a look. The reply he received, however, was definitely anything but what he had expected.

With a shrill sob, the dark-red haired girl’s arms went around his neck with almost enough strength to snap his neck in a tight hug. Harry blushed a bit and tried to edge away, but before he could move, the girl let go of him and slapped him across the face.

“Ow!” He yelped, clutching his cheek. “What was *that* for?!”

“For scaring me half to death, that’s what!” She replied in an angry shout, her eyes wet with tears.

Harry and Draco shared a look that clearly said ‘God, she’s Nutters’. With the capital on nutters. Don’t ask how *that* can be shared in a look.

“So, are we finally going to learn what happened down there? Snape said it was all over, but I’d rather hear it from your end.” He said.

Harry nodded and started explaining the whole story from the start, mostly for Draco. The boy in question burst out laughing almost directly at the start, much to Blaise’s embarrassment.

“You mean she terrorized *that* thing?! Congratulations, Blaise. Your music is officially scarier than you-know-who.”

“Yes, we’ll start referring it as you-know-what now.” Harry added teasingly.

The girl let out a growl and punched both their shoulders in annoyance.

The story unfolded to the eager public composed, at first, of a Draco who kept punctuating the story with comments and snide remarks such as:

“What a nice way to save them, Granger. Toast them, at least the plant won’t get them.”

And...

“Better not tell *that* story to Flint, Harry. He might change the budgers into Gargoyles.”

Up to...

“Blaise, a queen? Now that’s just wrong.”

“Oi, shut up! I did a great queen!”

“Yeah, being rescued by your freckled knight in shining armor...”

Only now did Harry realize something.

“Where’s Ron anyway?”

“Oh, he left.” Blaise said dismissingly with a careless wave of her hand. “He said something about not wanting to be with Draco.”

“His exact words were: I’m not spending a single second I don’t have to in the same room as that git. Friendly chap, isn’t he?” Draco asked sarcastically.

“Sounds like him.” Harry sighed, before continuing. Blaise actually started listening, since it was at that point she had been in the dark. After glossing over the troll and the potions,

“See, I told you Hermione would be more useful than me!” Blaise commented.

he continued up to the point where only he and Quirrell knew of the events. And obviously one of them was in no condition to tell.

When he was finished, the whole group was gawping at him, eyes wide enough to make the full moon seem insignificant, silent and stunned with surprise.

“You-know-who tried to get you on his side?!” Blaise finally screeched.

“You *destroyed* the stone?!” Hermione screeched immediately after, just as loud, if not louder.

“*Hah!* Told you I was right!” Gave a very smug Draco, who ignored the glares the other three gave him.

“Does that mean you’re in trouble?” Blaise asked.

“I don’t think so...” He said out loud, before adding a much less assured “at least I *hope* not.”

“They can’t really expel you, right?” Hermione asked nervously.

"I don't know... I hope not, the last thing I want is to go back to the Dursleys for good."

"You're not going back to *them!*" Blaise protested. "If anything happens, you'll live in *my* house. Not at those fat-asses' pigsty."

"Rest assured, mister Potter's position in this school is safe." A voice came to their ears.

"Professor Snape?" Harry asked, eyeing the greasy-haired man who had just entered the hospital wing. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that you can stay here; all your offences and deliberate annihilation of the school rules into fine dust have been forgiven."

Relieved faces and sighs came from all around the black-haired boy, who was grinning widely. The prospect of going back to live as a muggle, and with the Dursleys, had terrorized him a little.

...ok, a lot.

"If it was only me, however," Snape added with an angry glare "I would make sure you'd never set foot in this school again. Fortunately for you, the headmaster vouched in your favor."

"So I'm staying?"

"You are." Snape said with a nod. "But pull something like that again and I can't guarantee even the minister of magic will be able to stop me from kicking you out."

With that threat done, Snape walked back toward the exit.

"Are you sure it wasn't him?" Blaise growled in a whisper as the three first years turned their backs on the teacher.

Only Harry saw Snape give him a small smile and a nod.

The Slytherin boy smiled back and replied:

"Absolutely."

Ten minutes later, Pomfrey kicked the other first years out of the room, claiming she needed to check up on Harry. Even though she found nothing wrong with him, except that he was too thin, under no condition did she agree to let him go. Quote the lady:

“There’s no way an eleven years old child like you can feel so good after seeing the evilest dark wizard of the world.”

And even *if* Harry protested that Voldemort hadn’t even *touched* him, she wouldn’t listen and kept him in, claiming that he didn’t need to touch people to hurt them.

And so, it was a very bored Harry that looked out at the cloudless sky, a Harry wishing there *were* clouds so he had something to do, even if looking at cloud shapes isn’t very interesting.

“Did sssomeone get the lissenssse number of that truck?” A voice whined, it’s source tightly stuck within the covers.

“You’re awake, Nemesis?” Harry asked.

“What’d you think?” The snake replied, peeking his head out from inside the covers. “Can I kill whoever cast that spell on me?”

“No.” Harry said, then grinned. “Unless he gives me a detention.”

“Ah, so it wasss Sssnape.” Nemesis noted. “Never mind, wouldn’t want to sssink my fffangsss in sssat.”

Harry barely managed to stifle his laughter and he picked up and cradled Nemesis in his arms.

“Thanks for saving me, Nemesis.”

“If I didn’t, who’d take me to his classes next year? And who could I speak to?”

“Draco?” Harry asked, shrugging. “I’m sure he’d jump at the opportunity of having his ‘bad boy’ image reinforced by having a big, nasty snake coiled around his neck.”

“And if he called me sssat way, he’d have a big, nasssty sssnake ssstrangling hisss neck.” Nemesis noted, before shaking his head. “He wouldn’t underssstand me anyway.”

“Why not?”

Before Harry could receive his answer, a voice came from outside the plain, design less and boring curtains. An awfully familiar voice.

“Please, Poppy, just ten minutes. It won’t take very long.”

“Professor Dumbledore, I seriously doubt he’s in a state to receive anymore visitors... I suspect he’s been caught under a long-term curse...”

“I doubt it, Poppy. He seems perfectly fine to me. Aren’t you, Harry?”

‘How does he know I’m listening?’

“Yeah, I told her I feel fine.” He replied. “How did you know I was listening anyway?”

Madam Pomfrey’s footsteps went further away as Dumbledore slid the curtains open, allowing his old, wrinkled face in, his blue eyes twinkling. “That’s for me to know and you to find out.”

“I’ll take it as a challenge.” Harry noted with a small smirk.

The old man chuckled and sat down on the bed carefully as to not sit on Harry’s legs.

“Excellent work, by the way. Very few stu--- no, people in this school could have handled the situation as well as you did. Even if you *did* break the stone.”

“Professor Snape said you vouched for me, but why?” Harry asked. “I mean, I *did* break something that you’ve spent all year protecting...”

“First, let me assure you that Nicholas is in no way holding you responsible for this. Had you not broken the stone, Voldemort would have gotten it. And that would have been much worse than what you did.”

“Yeah, but there was no way he would have been able to take the stone out of the mirror.” Harry protested. “He wanted to use the stone, not just get it.”

“There are ways even a powerful magical item like the mirror of Erised can be confused about it’s functions, Harry. Had Quirrell decided to ask Voldemort for help, the two of them could have taken it out.”

“...confuse... you mean like making the mirror *think* they only wanted to get it?”

Dumbledore smiled. “You catch on quickly, Harry. A lot like your mother.”

Harry blushed a bit and couldn’t help the grin that broke through his face. The old man chuckled.

“But what about mister Flamel? Isn’t he going to...”

“Die? Indeed he will.” At Harry’s horrified incoming blabbering, Dumbledore raised a hand to stop him. “However, he assured me he would have destroyed it anyhow. An object that grants eternal life is too coveted to be safe forever, and all it takes is a single person with wrong intentions to turn it into a source of suffering or injustice.”

“B-...But he’ll die!”

“He knows that.” Dumbledore said with a nod. “He has just enough elixir to set his affairs into order before the inevitable happens. No matter how hard people try, life is *always* 100% fatal.”

Harry took a second to wonder how on earth Dumbledore knew of the Slytherin code of conduct, but not more, since the man continued to speak.

“Know that, to the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure. You know, the Stone was not such a wonderful thing. It only gave as much money and life and you could want!”

Harry wondered if the professor was sarcastic or not. Probably not.

“The two things most human beings would choose above all - the trouble is, humans do have a knack of choosing precisely those things that are worst for them.”

‘How can money and infinite life be bad for someone?’ The listener wondered.

One thing was *still* bothering Harry, though.

“What about Voldemort?” ‘No need for the you-know-who,’ he mused. ‘Dumbledore called him Voldemort before.’ “What happened to him?”

“He’s still out there, somewhere.” Dumbledore said with a wistful look at the window and a sigh.

“He’ll keep trying to find other ways to come back, won’t he.” It wasn’t a question.

“That’s doubtless. His thirst for power and revenge caused him to fear and hate, thus try to destroy, everything that could stop him; his enemies, traitors and, above all, death itself. And he knows that the state he is in can only hinder his quest. Therefore, he will try to come back by all means necessary, until he is stopped for good.”

‘But how to stop something that made itself impossible to kill?’ Harry wondered.

“The one thing we *can* do, however,” Dumbledore continued in closing tones “is stop his every attempts. If we manage to do that, then it’s possible he’ll never come back.”

'Possible, but not too likely.' Harry sighed mentally. Then, something came to his mind, since he was talking to Dumbledore, why not get a few questions answered?

"Sir, if I would ask you a question, you'd answer me, right?"

"In the best of my abilities, yes, as long as I can without intruding on secrets best kept hidden."

Damn. Harry thought. *'cause it's probably one.*

"I just want to know... why is Voldemort after me? Why did he go after my parents? I mean... I know my mom was a muggle-born, but..."

"Unfortunately, it's the only question I *cannot* answer." Dumbledore sighed.

I was spot on, unfortunately. He thought dryly.

"Then can you answer one other question?"

"Yes. I just did, but you can ask another."

Harry resisted the urge to whack the old man's head with a food tray for saying that.

"Why does Professor Snape hate me so much?"

"Oh, quite simple, actually. Your father and Professor Snape were here at Hogwarts at the same time. They hated each other like cats and dogs." The man said with a contagious, incurable chuckle that Harry caught on the spot. "That and, of course, the fact that your father did something he could never forgive him for."

"What?"

"Your father saved Severus' life."

Had Harry be drinking, it would have been spit out. Had Harry been eating, he would have choked. But since he was doing neither, he had to go with a gaping mouth and UFO-shaped eyes.

The man took his reaction with another chuckle. "Surprising, isn't it. Professor Snape couldn't stand the thought of being indebted to your father. And when he died, that debt was passed on to you... until he redeemed himself a couple of hours ago. Now, he is free to hate your father's memories in peace, and to re-build trust to his young charge, yourself. You did quite a surprise to everyone, when you were sorted in Slytherin, Harry."

Harry shrugged and grinned a bit. "I aimed for the best."

"I would argue, but then Poppy wouldn't be happy at me." Dumbledore replied, causing the boy to laugh.

Few minutes later, Dumbledore left the office with a small smile. Harry was a delightful child, really, and he was eager to get to know him better.

"You lied to him, you know." A familiar voice said.

"Ah, Severus. May I ask in what way I lied?"

"Sure you can." Said Snape.

"Very well, then. In what way did I lie?"

"Lupin wasn't the only reason I hated Potter and you know that. So why did you keep it a secret?"

"Oh, Severus. How would you feel if you knew one of your teachers had a crush on your mother, and your father was jealous?"

"...point taken, although I can't put myself in his shoes."

"..."

"What's with the silent treatment?"

"..."

“Don’t tell me.... Albus, please don’t tell me... Don’t tell me my mom... And one of my teachers...”

“...”

“...Albus, please answer me...”

“You’re the one who asked me not to tell.”

And with a final exclamation of disgust from the youngest, the two men rounded the corner and vanished in the multiple halls of Hogwarts.

Harry was allowed out of the infirmary on the last day, just in time to pack his stuff up and assist the house cup ceremony. Proudly wearing Nemesis on his arm and not caring about the looks that attracted, he sat down between Blaise and Draco, in front of Crabbe, Goyle and Pansy.

Because of the number of points Slytherin and Gryffindor had lost, and although they had gotten a lot, the two houses had only managed to reclaim second and third place, respectively. Ravenclaw had a comfortable advance on them, something which the little Flitwick, who was it’s head, was quite ecstatic.

Needless to say, the other houses didn’t have the same festive spirit as Ravenclaw. Even less for Hufflepuff, who managed their 11th fourth place in a row.

At the staff table, Dumbledore got up and demanded attention by tapping his spoon against his cup.

“May I have your attention? Thank you. It’s time to discern the winner of the house cup.”

“Why? It’s obvious they win.” Draco grumbled darkly, pointing at the Ravenclaw table.

“In fourth place, it’s Hufflepuff with 352 points, then Gryffindor with 376, Slytherin and their 386 points, and finally, the Ravenclaws with 426!”

The banners became blue and bronze under the ecstatic bellows of the Ravenclaws. However, before they could begin to sing a victory song, Dumbledore tapped his spoon on his cup again.

“Yes, yes, good job to the Ravenclaws. *However,*” at that word, Flitwick’s grin froze and the Ravenclaw’s cheerfulness vanished like a fire burning in the middle of a flood. “in the light of recent events, I must give out some last-minute points. First, to mister Draco Malfoy, for an exemplary reliability and perspicacity, I award Slytherin... 40 points.”

Draco promptly received enough claps to his back to make his pale skin gain color. The boy put a smug – and slightly pained – grin to his face. They were *tied* to Ravenclaw!

“Then, for quick thinking, excellent logic and a certainly... excellent Incendio hex, I award Hermione Granger and Gryffindor sixty points.”

“Why’d *she* get more than me?!” Draco growled, glaring. Again, he received taps on his back, but they were sympathetic this time.

“We’re tied to Ravenclaw *and* in second place now.” Blaise noted grimly.

“Then, to Blaise Zabini,” The girl promptly blushed and grinned, “who’s complete lack of musical skill made it quite easier to get by the guard dog, although he is now taking anti-phobia lessons to learn to like music again. I award Slytherin fourty points.”

Yes, Blaise did blush and try to hide, but it was mostly from the amused chuckles and the laughs from the Gryffindors, Slytherins and Hufflepuffs. The Ravenclaws, however, were quite horrified to see they were being overtaken at the finish line.

“To Ron Weasley, for playing the best chess game to have blessed Hogwarts for a good, long time, and for a very noble sacrifice, I award fifty points to Gryffindor.”

"We're twenty points behind!!" Harry gasped in horror.

"And, to Harry Potter." Dumbledore began more seriously. "For Gryffindoric courage and Slytherinish wit, for having defeated the dark lord once again and, above all, for an excellent aerial performance, I award mister Harry Potter, and Slytherin, fifty points."

The Slytherin table burst into applauses and, this time, it was Harry who was being congratulated. The blushing boy grinned and got up, bowing to his housemates theatrically, to the house's major hilarity. A look at the staff table, at Professor Snape, especially, made his grin grow wider; the man was shooting him a small, yet noticeable, smile. A look at the Gryffindor table, however, made his grin vanish. Ron was shooting him the glare to end all glares.

"And finally!" Dumbledore unexpectedly said with a wide grin and twinkling eyes as the applauses abruptly stopped. "While it takes great courage to face one's enemies, it takes even more to face one's friends. Which is why I offer, to mister Longbottom of Gryffindor... thirty points."

The hall was silent, stunned. *NEVILLE LONGBOTTOM?!??!*

Then, the Gryffindor seventh year prefect began clapping, and was imitated by the rest of the housemates. Soon, someone began whistling, someone not without red-hair and a twin. The sound was contagious and soon, Neville was being congratulated from all sides.

"It appears we have something of a rarity happening... Both Gryffindor and Slytherin are in a stalemate! What happens then, you ask?"

"Heads or tails!" Someone from Gryffindor, bearing the same description as said red-head from before, proposed.

"Rock paper scissors!" A Slytherin third year shouted.

Dumbledore shook his head with a grin, taking the cup. "Nope, not heads or tails, not Rock Paper Scissors. In case of Stalemate, it's only normal to give both houses the cup, isn't it?"

And, with a clap of his fingers, the banners hanging from the roof turned from blue with a bronze design, to red and green with the design of a golden lion in the green section turning into a dozen silver snakes in the red.

The two tables looked at each other and promptly began cheering. Harry grinned at Ron, who returned it. Snape gave a small, undetectable smile at Dumbledore, then at Minerva from behind the old man.

“We’ll win next year.” The teacher challenged.

“Don’t bet on it.” The deputy headmistress retorted.

Dumbledore’s chuckles were audible up to where Harry was sitting.

“You asked to speak to me, sir?” Harry asked, knocking on the door of the potions classroom.

“Ah, Potter.” Snape said, his voice devoid of the usual cold tone. “Yes I did. Sit down.” Yet, it still managed to prompt the boy into obeying the order quickly, sending him in front of one of the desks in the back.

The classroom was not a place that could be called “Welcoming”. However, the bottles-O-unmentionables decorating it were even more imposing when only he and the professor were there. Snape was looking over some piece of parchment, holding a red-tipped quill in his right hand.

For a while, neither talked. Harry wondered if it was some attempt from the black-haired teacher to look imposing. Whatever it was, though, it worked.

“You know what, Potter?” Snape finally said after a long time, looking up from grading the paper, which he deposited upside-down on a pile

of identical pages of parchment. "I think that, in your youth, you've been dipped in a fairy spring, which is the only possible way to explain the extreme luck that allowed the fact that you are still breathing from happening."

Harry felt his anger grow. Had he been brought here just to be insulted?

'Probably wants to enjoy verbally punching me before I leave.' He grumbled mentally.

"However, as they say, luck can run out." Snape continued. "And one day, you might face a danger so great that even *that* won't save you."

The man got up, walking toward Harry in slow, long steps that made his cape blow slightly.

"Your father was exactly the same way, you know." Harry looked up in surprise. "Yes, he was. Every single year, he risked his hide some way or another, and *always* managed to get out in one piece. However, in the end..."

The boy looked back down, frowning. What was Snape saying?

"Harry, if *anything* happens next year, which, around you, it probably will, I want you to come straight to me, for your safety." Harry almost jumped three feet up in the air. The whole surprise of the statement dimmed the fact that the teacher had called him by name. "Even if it looks silly or stupid. The most carefully hidden plots are camouflaged as a bunch of coincidences, after all."

Harry didn't answer right away, his eyes as big as saucers. Did *Snape* mean he'd protect him? **Snape?!**

At his lack of answer, Snape's eyes turned cold and glaring. "Potter, promise me, and not an empty one."

"...Y...Yes sir." He said, nodding. "I will, I promise."

It was a very depressed Harry who looked out of the window of the Hogwarts express the next morning, staring at the disappearing castle while softly caressing Hedwig's feathers. Nemesis was munching on some every flavors beans, every now and then complaining about having no taste buds and being unable to decide if it was good or not.

Draco was sitting just beside him and was engaged in a furious chess battle with Ron. So far, the red-haired boy was winning, but it was a close match; seven white pieces for six bla—

"There." Draco said with a grin as his queen smashed a bishop to pieces.

...make that seven black, there was no winner so far.

Hermione was reading a book, as usual. However, every now and then, she would look up at the game and give looks to both players before sighing and rolling her eyes.

Blaise was sitting directly in front of Harry, trying to keep the beans to herself without touching Nemesis; she was a little bit freaked by him. However, when he sighed in defeat as the top of the astronomy tower vanished beyond a hill, she looked up at him and smiled sadly.

"Don't want to go home either, eh?"

The boy shook his head. "I feel like I just left."

"It did go quickly—" "I mean I feel like I just left home. This summer's going to be hell."

"Well, at least you're staying at the Zabini's, right?" Hermione asked, looking up. The two other boys took that moment to break their game and look at him, although Draco's hand went back to his side when the black pawn threatened to cut his finger off.

"Only good point of it." Harry sighed with a smile.

The girl gasped and blocked her mouth, looking at Harry apologetically. "Sorry, you won't be able to: We're visiting our family in Italy."

"Can't I come along?" Harry asked, getting desperate.

"Mom asked, but Dumbledore said something about your safety being compromised outside of England. You'd be mobbed by reporters."

"I don't care, it's better than the Dursleys." Harry sighed.

"Look on the bright side, you can blackmail them into taking good care of you." Draco said.

Harry gave the other boy a puzzled look, which he answered by revealing his wand, making the black-haired boy grin.

"That's right! They don't know I can't do magic during the summer!"

"You'd do that?!" Hermione gasped in horror.

"It's better than being locked in the cupboard again. I doubt I'm small enough for it anymore." Harry explained. "Plus, there's no harm in it, they're just a bunch of idiots who deserve it, after all."

"I'd drink to that." Blaise agreed with a smirk. "If I *had* something to drink."

By the time they reached the King's cross station, it was nearly night time. The lights of London whizzed by during the last few minutes until the train rolled to a stop, finally ending its trek in a loud whistle.

After getting their trunks, the five students headed for the nearest exit. Draco purposefully lagged behind, standing in between Crabbe and Goyle. Harry understood; Draco didn't want his father to know he was friends with him.

As soon as they were out, an army of red-heads went to claim the Weasley child. He gave them a final wave and a grin.

“See you all next year!” He shouted as he was pulled away by the twins.

“You’d better owl me or else!” Hermione threatened.

“That goes for me, too, Weasley!” Harry called.

Ten seconds later, a pale, blond-haired man turned toward them, his pale grey eyes coldly glaring at them.

“Draco.” He simply called. “Come.”

And with no other word, the boy walked ahead, passing by Harry.

“Don’t owl me.” He hissed as he passed, making it sound like he was sneering at Harry.

“Well I won’t miss you either, Malfoy.” Harry snapped back hostilely, but with a hidden gleam in his eyes.

With a smirk hidden behind a sneer, the boy followed his father.

“That was Draco’s father?” Hermione gasped silently as they headed toward the exit of the platform.

“Feel the chill, ‘mione. Feel the chill.” Blaise said in her best yankee surfer accent.

Soon after they passed through, Hermione was collected by a couple that were obviously muggles, as they were impeccably dressed in non-magical attire; something, he had learned, only muggles managed.

Hermione turned toward Blaise, gave her a tight hug, then hugged Harry, before leaving.

“Beaking hearts already, Harry?” A familiar female voice said.

“Mom!” Blaise squealed, hugging her mother tightly.

Harry blushed. "She's just a friend!"

"That's how it starts..." Mrs Zabini said with a grin, patting Blaise's head.

"Since I can't speak for her parents, I'm not going to tell you to "be careful with her". Although if you get the same idea for Blaise..." Mr Zabini let his voice trail suggestively.

Harry's face could now compete with Ron's hair and a tomato in a redness contest. He crossed his arms and huffed, under everyone's laughs. "It's *not* funny!"

"I'll get drive us back to Privet drive." Mr Zabini said, twirling the keys.

"Dursley decided not to come." Mrs Zabini said sourly. "His official reason was that it would seem strange for the neighborhood if both cars left and came back at the same time."

Blaise snorted. "Like anyone have nothing better to do in their free time than to look at *them*. I'd rather look at the content of a toilet. He just didn't want to lift his fat butt off his couch."

"Had you been talking about anyone else, Blaise, I would have scolded you. However, since it's Vernon Dursley we're talking about and that you're probably right..." Mrs Zabini let her voice trail as everyone laughed.

The way back was just as fun as ever; Mrs Zabini spent most of the way entertaining them on stuff the Dursleys did to "protect" themselves against the magical family that lived next doors; some of which involved crosses at the windows, growing garlic in the flower box and even oriental warding papers with about as much magic potential to them as a sleeping Dudley.

"It's like they think we're vampires or something." Mr Zabini added, not keeping his eyes off the road.

Unfortunately, the trip *did* end. Never had the trunk seemed so heavy, never had his steps felt so slow.

"Well, I guess it's a goodbye for now, Blaise." Harry said as they stood on the walkway in front of the fence between the two houses.

She gave him a reassuring smile and hugged him tightly; he expected his shoulder to pop at least twice, before she let him go.

"Owl me often."

Harry smiled sadly and nodded.

"I promise I will."

...and both neighbors turned away, walking in their respective houses. Never before had a single, simple wooden fence blocked off two completely different worlds.

Severus Snape yawned as he lay down on his bed in his comfortable house in Hogsmeade. *Finally* he was free of the dozens of dunderheads he was supposed to teach potions to. And *finally* the burden of the life debt was lifted from his shoulders.

He was happy.

For the first time in over ten years, he felt truly happy.

The first thing he had done upon entering was to re-place the pictures he had arranged back into his office. Pictures of him and his graduating group, of his friends and himself, of his successes and youthful follies...

...only one picture was misplaced.

Severus Snape quickly corrected the mistake.

Lily Evans Potter looked back at him with a warm smile, her green eyes glittering playfully as she waved her wand threateningly at the camera.

...for the first time in twelve years.

End of book 1, The Snake-who-lived and the philosopher's stone.

**Blink* Did I just write that?! I DID!! I DID!! I DID SEE A... *blink* Erm... shutting up.*

*I'll take a short break of a few hours, and I'll start working on book 2.
^_-*

I admit I've inspired myself off Slytherin Rising for the cup retribution ceremony; it just didn't feel right to have either Gryffindor or Slytherin win. Or any house, actually. So, I decided for the next best thing, a tie.

Here is the final notes of the fic: characterization, which is essential to a good AU. I'll only do the characters I modified from the Cannon.

*Harry: He is certainly **not** as gullible and dense as Gryffindor Harry. He also tends to think better in tight situations, and although he doesn't have the same bashfulness in the face of danger, he **can** get himself out faster; he improvises less. Much less. He's also a lot more sarcastic.*

Ron: Less hostile toward Slytherins, but barely, Harry's absence in the 'Gryffindor trio' made him much closer to Hermione than in the original books. Her friendship is also much more important to him. He still maintains the ideal, however, that most Slytherins end up death eaters; to his eyes, only Blaise, Harry and Draco are fine, and the last one barely.

*Hermione: Again, Harry's absence in the trio made her closer to Ron than in the books. She is more used to his bashfulness, although doesn't approve of it any more than originally. She is also very open to Slytherins and disapproves Ron's discrimination. In their group, she is closest to Blaise; they **are** the only two girls.*

Draco: His proximity and friendship to two 'mudbloods' made him start doubting the values his father has given him. Plus, the fact that he is farther away from Crabbe and Goyle both makes him less of a

“high school bully”, and makes them actually force their brains to go around, which is beneficial to both.

All and all, yes, Harry changed a lot. If it is all for the best, however, is a question still unanswered ^_-

~Akuma-sama